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A LOVE OFFENSIVE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

HISTORY OF FORT ST. GEORGE, MADRAS
ON THE COROMANDEL COAST
THE NAUTCH GIRL
THE FOREST OFFICER
A MIXED MARRIAGE
THE SANYASI
DILYS
CASTE AND CREED
THE TEA-PLANTER
THE INEVITABLE LAW
DARK CORNERS
THE UNLUCKY MARK
SACRIFICE
THE RAJAH
THE MALABAR MAGICIAN
THE OUTCASTE
LOVE IN THE HILLS
SOUTHERN INDIA
LOVE IN A PALACE
LOVE BY AN INDIAN RIVER
A LOVE TANGLE
MISSING!

A LOVE OFFENSIVE

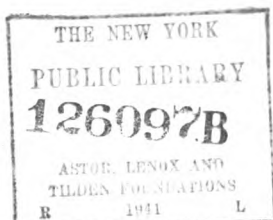
BY

F. E. PENNY

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TO MY BROTHER
TOM FARR
A LOVER OF THE
CEYLON JUNGLES

100100

CHARACTERS

FRED GOLDENHAM . . .	A tea-planter, owner of the Toona Kelli estate in Ceylon.
GAY GOLDENHAM . . .	His sister, keeping house for him.
GEOFFREY CHARNES . . .	Owner of the Wanna Wella estate.
OLIVER CAMPBELL . . .	A tea-planter.
NELLIE CAMPBELL . . .	His daughter.
JOHN SMITH . . .	Owner of the Tota estate.
HELEN LOVEDEN . . .	Widow of Noel Loveden.
BETTY and BILLY LOVEDEN .	Her children.
CATHERINE MILDENHALL .	A nursing sister on leave.
DR. CAVERSHAM . . .	The district doctor.
DAKSHI . . .	A Gipsy snake-charmer.
HATHAY . . .	His wife.
MARIDI . . .	A Gipsy girl.
CHILDREN, GIPSIES, SINHALESE, SERVANTS, etc.	

A LOVE OFFENSIVE

CHAPTER I

THE scene was beautiful beyond description. A garden of lilies and roses, and every flower that may be found in English hothouses, grew rampant and luxuriant under the tropical sun of Ceylon. To the right was a wide sloping lawn which fell away from the bungalow. Peach and orange trees bordered it and broke the heat of the sun upon the flower borders.

Most beautiful among this wealth of blossom, fruit, and foliage were the English children grouped under the shade of the orange trees. In age they ranged between four and ten years. The boys were clad in blue smocks; the girls in pink; and when they moved and chased each other round the trees or across the lawn, they looked like blossoms themselves, blown hither and thither by the soft hill breezes.

The little people were daily becoming more boisterous with returning vitality. Their own parents, grilling in the low country, would scarcely have recognized, in the active, restless mites, the limp, inert children they had despatched from the moist, enervating heat of Colombo.

It was strange that the great European war should have such a far-reaching effect as to influence the life of an innocent child at the other end of the world; yet such was the case in more respects than one.

These boys and girls in the ordinary conditions of peaceful times would have been sent to England, to get a grip of life, and be fitted to take their places in the public schools which were to make them men and women. Through the war they were stranded in the tropics.

B

Men who could afford to keep up two establishments sent their wives and babes to the hills of India or to Newara Eliya, the sanatorium of Ceylon. Times were hard, however, and there were many Englishmen in the island who could not afford the luxury. To such as these Gay Goldenham came as a succouring friend in need.

High up in one of the planting districts of Ceylon she had conceived the idea of turning her brother's large rambling bungalow on the Toona Kelli estate into a children's holiday home. It was a happy thought. Assisted by Fred Goldenham, she converted the spacious bedrooms, designed in the old days of planting prosperity, into dormitories.

A broad passage ran down the centre of the bungalow. It was lighted by a skylight. Right and left on entering the house from the front verandah were the dining and drawing-rooms. Behind were eight large rooms, four on each side of the passage. At the end were Fred's quarters with dressing-room and office.

Gay's assistants in her scheme of philanthropy were Helen Loveden and Catherine Mildenhall. Helen was a widow and not yet thirty years of age. Her husband, a planter, was one of the first, on the outbreak of the war, to volunteer for military service from Ceylon. He was also one of the first to be sacrificed in the war. Owing to the difficulty and danger attending the voyage home, Helen decided to remain in the island where her money was invested and her income paid. When Gay asked her to come to Toona Kelli and bring her two children with her, she accepted the invitation with gratitude, although she had never met either of the Goldenhams. Gay heard of Mrs. Loveden through a mutual friend to whom she had confided her plan, and who thought that Billy and Betty Loveden, the planter's little orphans, would be most suitable as her first guests. They arrived, and it seemed probable that they would remain, like many others who followed them, "for the duration of the war."

Catherine Mildenhall had been nursing in India and Mesopotamia. Her health gave way under the strenuous work and rough conditions of the first months of the campaign. When she had recovered from the illness brought on by the heat and the privations she suffered, she answered

Gay's advertisement for a nursery governess and went up into the Ceylon hills without delay.

The Toona Kelli estate lay on the southern slopes of a wide fertile valley. The valley ran up towards a mountain mass whose sides were covered with forest. The estate was the last of a long series and adjoined the jungle. It was some miles from the cart road, and as many again from the railway. To new arrivals it appeared to be "at the back of beyond," a salient of cultivation thrust deep into the primeval forest.

The house was situated at the highest point of the estate on a spur of the mountain, and the acres of tea spread like a velvet mantle around it on three sides. A brawling stream, that gathered its waters as it flowed, passed near the bungalow and turned the turbine wheels of the tea factories below. In former days the little river had been buried in the leafy depths of the forest; but now it was exposed to the sun and air, and purified so that it was fit to drink. Here and there in the damp meadows, where the stream spread into silent pools, the wild ginger and balsam and begonia of the forest still grew, and the occasional leech might be found. At other points the ground fell away sharply; the water boiled and fumed among the boulders that strewed its bed, roaring when the monsoon rains descended and murmuring gently during the dry season.

The forest was separated from the bungalow by a narrow belt of clearing. The thick vegetation stood like a wall, impenetrable except where an opening was made for the track that passed over the hills to the other side. Unless the hatchet and pruning-knife were kept busy the track would soon have grown up and been impassable.

Between the bungalow and the forest were built the servants' quarters and stables. To the right and left of the house stretched large kitchen gardens. In front the flower borders and lawn spread away to the tea bushes. A bridle path, broad enough to allow of a rickshaw to pass along, wound through the tea down the valley towards the cart road. This path seemed to end at the bungalow; but it was not so. A right of way existed to the forest. The track ran for many miles through the thickly wooded hills, finding its way at length to the low-lying lands between

the mountains and the sea. The forest was Government property and strictly preserved in its primeval condition for climatic reasons connected with the monsoon rains.

Every morning, after an early breakfast at half-past seven, the children turned out into the garden to romp and play, or to sit under the orange trees and listen to one of Nurse Catherine's stories. They rarely went for a walk. There were only two walks possible, one up into the forest behind the bungalow, the other down towards the distant road. The forest walk was never without its fascination; but the path through the tea had no attraction, with its deep drain on one side and the pruned tea bushes on the other.

On a bright sunny morning the children had gathered together and were seated under the orange trees. They were full of excitement. A snake-charmer and juggler had come from the valley below, picking up rupees on their way from the scattered bungalows of the estates, and cents in the coolies' lines and the local roadside shops.

Toona Kelli, the last piece of cultivation, was often made a resting-place by the native traveller, who was seldom refused a night's shelter if he required it, in one of the empty stalls of the old cattle shed.

The juggler with his assistant had arrived overnight. He was warmly welcomed by the servants of the establishment, who found life monotonous and uneventful, so far removed as it was from any big town. The coolies and their families in the estate lines below the bungalow were equally interested. An exhibition in the lines after sunset on the previous evening had filled men, women, and children with delight.

Pedro, the Goanese butler, proposed that the conjuror should give a performance in the garden for the benefit of the children, and Gay warmly seconded it.

The conjuror was seated in the full light of the sun in front of the children. To the right the servants of the establishment had gathered. On the left, not very sure of their welcome, stood as many stragglers from the lines and the tea factory as dared to intrude.

By the conjuror's side was the usual shabby old sack containing his "properties." In front lay three flat circular baskets, the prisons of three terrible hooded cobras which

the magician claimed to have captured and tamed by occult means. A little behind was a larger basket to be used later for the basket-trick.

Expectant eyes were fastened on the conjuror, who took out his panpipes—made with a dried gourd and a couple of reeds—and began to play the strange wild music that was as old as the hills themselves. He touched the baskets gently with his foot, and presently a flat shining head pushed the loose lid aside and reared itself up. It was followed by a second and a third. The beautiful hoods were spread so that the spectacles were visible. The assistant seized one of the snakes by the neck and drew it out of its basket. It moved in curves, and the sunlight showed the colours of its scales. The two others remained in their baskets with their heads raised. As the piper played they swayed slightly. This was considered a dance in response to the music.

When the novelty had worn off the conjuror stopped piping, and his assistant clapped the lids on to the baskets, shutting down the snakes with small ceremony. The favoured serpent was beginning to enjoy the sun, and protested with a soft hiss at being hauled up by the neck and thrust back into the confined space of its prison.

The marvellous growth and fruition of the mango was the first feat after the cobras had been disposed of. It is an old, old trick with the Indian conjuror, and if well done never loses its attraction.

The mango was shown in its various stages of growth, from the planting of the dry stone to the magical production of a green mango fruit. The green leaves were fairly fresh, although rather crumpled. When the cloth under which the transformation took place was withdrawn from the mud pie in which the stone was placed, and the blossom exhibited, there was a catching of the breath among the audience; but at sight of the fruit a chorus of "Ah! Bahs!" fell from the lips of coolies and servants, while the children shouted their surprise.

The juggler glowed with pride at this testimony to his success. He seized the rag doll known to the whole race of Indian conjurors as "Ramaswamy," the worker of miracles, and waved it to and fro. Instantly the mango branch disappeared and the trick was finished.

The conjuror signed to his assistant to "take the floor," which he did with alacrity, being youthful and keen to show his prowess.

He seated himself in front of his audience, and produced half a dozen smooth stones, the size of a pigeon's egg, but flat instead of round. With a great show of business he proceeded to swallow four out of the six, stowing each one away in the recesses of his throat with much pantomimic action, to indicate the difficulties of the process. When the fourth had disappeared he thumped his chest, writhed and emitted cries of simulated distress, until a stone was disgorged. Under similar contortions the whole number reappeared one after the other. He assured his audience that he performed this alarming feat solely by the magical aid of Ramaswamy.

The children were delighted with the stone-swallowing; but Catherine and Helen were not so pleased. They had sudden qualms of doubt. An attempt at an imitation of the trick by the adventurous Billy Loveden might lead to disastrous results.

Helen glanced round in search of her son, whom she had left to his own devices since breakfast that she might devote herself to a fragile timid child who had lately arrived from the low country. A few months ago Billy was almost as limp and lifeless as the little girl she held in her arms. Now he was the leading pickle of the establishment. She concluded that he was still with Gay inside the bungalow, where she was busy filling the flower vases with roses.

Pleased with his success, the young magician began to swallow stones again. With Ramaswamy's help he hoped to surpass his last effort by the addition of two more pebbles.

After many contortions five of the stones disappeared into his gullet; that is to say they were not visible in his mouth, which he frequently opened to show that it was empty. At this precise moment Gay issued from the bungalow with garden scissors and basket. She came over the lawn towards the party of happy children. Her sun hat was pushed back, showing her golden brown hair and the darker eyebrows, straight as if they had been drawn with a ruler. Her large grey eyes, the tint of the monsoon clouds,

dwelt upon her little guests. Those eyes were peculiar in one respect. They had a trick of smiling unconsciously before the lips had curved. They seemed to be in direct communication with her mind, and to speak before she could frame the words she intended to use. People, when they put a question to her, said that they had their answer before ever she spoke.

Gay satisfied herself with a comprehensive glance that the children were amused and interested. The devourer of stones was holding the sixth pebble between finger and thumb. His cavern of a mouth was opened wide, and the stone was placed on his red tongue. He proceeded to draw it slowly into his mouth.

Gay was standing a little forward, but not in a position to obstruct the view of the children. She turned towards the conjuror and his assistant, and met the keen gaze of the older man, who was examining her curiously. During the pebble trick he had been sitting motionless with his snake baskets and bag of properties near him. His brows contracted, and his eyes blinked, as he met Gay's look. He shifted uneasily, and began to press down the covers of the snake baskets as though preparatory to making a move.

From the elder man Gay's glance went to the younger, who, with Ramaswamy held aloft, was preparing to make the magical passes that would release the stones and restore them to the lawn.

Slowly the stone swallower turned towards the new-comer, his eyes fixed on hers, and his magic held in suspense.

What happened inside his internal economy could not be divined; but the mysterious working of magic went very much awry. The stones refused to obey Ramaswamy's command, and appear in due order one by one. The performer beat his chest and uttered choking cries of distress that were not simulated.

Gay, thinking it all part of the play, began to laugh. The children caught the infection; and the native portion of the audience, servants and coolies, always ready to ridicule failure, joined in.

Amid shouts of laughter on all sides, the unfortunate man, gasping for breath, disgorged a shower of pebbles. Gay moved towards him, her laughter dying down abruptly,

as she recognized the fact that he had narrowly escaped a nasty accident.

"You nearly choked yourself that time," she remarked. "You tried to swallow too many."

The man looked up at her as he sat there with eyes that streamed under his effort.

"That very hard trick, lady; too hard," he said pathetically, as he slowly stowed the pebbles away in his pocket.

"Try two instead of six," she counselled.

Meanwhile Pedro had edged his way quietly towards his mistress. The conjuror's movements suggesting a sudden breaking up of the seance and hurried departure, had sent a wave of consternation over the servants and coolies. They were all sober enough now at the prospect of no more tricks; and anxious looks were directed towards the butler, which he fully understood. Could he prevail on his mistress to command the two men to give all that they had promised?

Helen and Catherine joined Gay where she stood.

"The man promised to show us the basket trick," said Nurse Catherine. "I don't consider that he has earned his five rupees yet."

"What have they done between them?" asked Gay.

"We have had the growth of the mango and the stone-swallowing."

"They ought to give us more for the money than that. Pedro!" she said, turning to the butler. "Tell the conjuror I must have at least five good tricks for my five rupees. Easy tricks will please the children. No more stone-swallowing, please; or we shall have Master Billy imitating the man and choking himself. By-the-by, where is Billy?" she asked, looking at Helen for a reply.

The butler spoke to the two men, and there was a discussion. The older conjuror offered to forego the five rupees if the lady would excuse him. Pedro demurred to this, knowing what a pleasure the performance was to the large party that had assembled. Why should they all be disappointed for a freak on the part of the conjurors?

Still the men hesitated, watching Gay furtively as they talked and avoiding her eye. After much pressure they consented to remain and continue their exhibition; but

they made a condition which Pedro promised to see carried out. The young mistress "with the eyes," as they termed Gay, was not to be present; they could do nothing under her gaze.

Meanwhile the snakes were once more released, and they served to engage attention and restore the psychic atmosphere required by the Indian juggler.

"Helen, where's your Billy?" again inquired Gay.

"In the bungalow, I believe. He was with you, wasn't he, when you were doing the flowers?"

"No; I haven't seen anything of him since breakfast."

"I had better go and look for the young monkey," said Helen, turning with reluctance towards the bungalow; she was young enough to enjoy the conjuring of the wandering magician.

"I'll go!" cried Gay. "Pedro tells me that I am wanted indoors. The market cooly has damaged the beef-box, and it must be mended."

The beef-box was a tin case locked with a duplicate key by the native shopkeeper after he had packed it with the daily supply of meat and grocery.

"I hope Billy is not in mischief," remarked Helen, as she seated herself in a garden chair behind the row of children.

"He can't possibly be in mischief that matters," responded Gay, confidently. "A tin pot of water and a sodden smock will be the sum total of the damage, I fancy."

She walked away with a light heart, rather pleased than otherwise at the thought of Billy's naughtiness. When her little guests arrived in the breezy mountains of Ceylon, they were far too limp and lifeless to be anything but angelically good; and it rejoiced her heart when returning vitality brought the power to be naughty and rebellious and quarrelsome. It was the best sign in the world; and she was ready to hug and kiss Billy Loveden as soon as she found him; no matter what infantile wickedness he might have perpetrated.

Billy was becoming the sturdiest of rebels against nursery rule. Sad to say, Goldenham secretly encouraged the boy to kick over the traces; and he was never better pleased than when Gay and Helen appealed to him to exercise his authority and enforce obedience. At Fred's word the boy

became lamb-like in his submission, and Goldenham loved him for it. He often took the child with him to the factory, which was close at hand in the valley by the river-side ; or on the estate when he was visiting pruners, or weeders, or pluckers. Billy marched by his side, easily getting into step with him, as he was slightly lame ; and at the end of the morning's walk the boy was less tired than his companion.

As Gay turned away from the lawn Pedro signalled to the two jugglers, who at once applied themselves to the preparation of the next trick. With a reassuring nod to them, the butler followed Gay into the house.

"Billy ! Billy-o ! Billee !" shouted Gay ; but no answer was heard.

When they had hunted through the bungalow and kitchen gardens without success, Gay called the two gardeners and sent them down to the tea-house with instructions to go to the different gangs of coolies at work on the estate, and to make inquiries as to whether the boy had been seen with the master.

"I think Master Billy has gone into the jungle," said the head gardener to the butler.

"Into the forest !" said Gay, who understood the man's language ; and her forehead wrinkled with lines of sudden anxiety. "Impossible ! The child wouldn't take that path by himself."

"This morning master did not go to the tea-house. He went into the jungle. Master Billy saw him go, and called after him to know if he might come too."

"What did the master say ?"

"He shouted no ; he was going too far for Master Billy to walk. After his honour was gone perhaps the child followed by himself."

"H'm ! I didn't think the little chap had courage enough for that," said Gay, as she turned back into the bungalow.

CHAPTER II

THE forest behind the bungalow held a peculiar fascination for the children. This was partly the doing of Nurse Catherine. She had an inexhaustible stock of fairy lore. When the scene was not a palace of gold with silver doors and diamond windows—Catherine had a secret weakness for luxurious extravagance—it was a forest. The forest was more often requisitioned than the palace because of its infinite variety. It could be a bower of ferns and blossom; or a deep green glade of foliage; or it could be dark and gloomy; or shrouded in mysterious clouds that trailed their ragged fringes over the treetops and blotted out the sun and sky and guiding landmarks.

The forest of her tales was understood to be Gay's forest behind the house. There gallant knights fought dragons and rescued fair ladies. There dwelt the fairies in the spotted tubes of the orchid; and the fairy folk danced in the moonlight under the long-fingered fronds of the tropical ferns. There goblins and elves and water nymphs haunted the tumbling waterfalls and rode the wild animals that came to the waterholes to drink; while deep in the recesses of rocks and precipices lived dragons that played with boa constrictors and kept leopards as cats.

In seasons when the jungle was dry and the weather fine, Gay conducted the little people along the track that led up the huge wooded ridge towards the bare rounded head of a mountain ten miles distant. On those smooth downs, called by the planters patanas, at rare intervals the wild elephant might be met, walking up by way of the open stream, muddying the water as he browsed on the rank herbage, and throwing cooling sprays of the stream over his back. Then reaching the wall-like edge of the forest, he

plunged into the shade by way of a track that had been used by his ancestors for a thousand or more generations.

The path near the bungalow had been widened and cleared of overgrowth by Goldenham for a couple of miles, which was the extent of his sister's wanderings on foot. It made a shaded walk at all times of the day. A mile from the house was a natural glade, where a stream flowed down the hillside. An occasional use of the axe kept it clear enough for the children to picnic there on occasions.

Beyond the two miles the path narrowed and was rougher, with half-buried rocks and the outcropping roots of trees. Overhead the great limbs spread with their canopy of foliage strong enough to resist the raging cyclone as it swept across the hills. Links of creeper passed from tree to tree, festooning here and hanging loosely there. On all sides grew the shy orchid high up out of reach of the hand of man, a safe resting-place for the strong-winged butterfly dressed in the metallic greens and blues of the humming-bird.

The Ceylon forest is free from the aggressively savage animal. The elephant troubles no one if unmolested. The wild pig prefers retirement; and the leopard, like the wild cat, will not take the offensive towards man unless driven thereto by deliberate injury. Even the cobra and the tic polonga, the two most deadly snakes of the forest, prefer to wriggle out of sight and remain hidden till the intruder has passed. Gay had nothing to fear when she took her guests into the jungle.

She loved the forest even more than the children loved it. The great trees seemed to have an individuality of their own. Their size and strength and their age were always impressive. The very creepers with their woody stems, many of them as big in girth as young English trees, were no more to the huge limbs of the giants than ropes tossed aloft.

Ever since she was a child the trees had stood unchanged. They seemed not a day older than when, clinging to her mother's skirts, she had been taken into the forest for the first time. For how many ages had they reared their heads towards the sun and weathered each monsoon as it came in its season with wind and downpour? Long before she or her parents were born they were established in phalanxes on the slopes of the mountain; and for long after her life

was ended they would remain ; till in the remote future, they dropped where they were into the arms of the rising generation of trees that had sprung from seed cast abroad many decades ago.

Having thoroughly searched the premises and despatched the gardeners to seek wider afield, Gay decided to walk into the forest. She sent Pedro back to his work, and picking up an alpenstock, she started out. She had no need of help. Billy was not likely to leave the well-defined pathway. Game-tracks crossed the path, but she had never taken Billy down one of these ; and it was extremely improbable that he would think of exploring beyond the usual limit of his morning walks. She felt confident that she would find him in the glade where they picnicked, gathering ferns for her, or vainly chasing a butterfly that had fluttered down from the treetops on a sunbeam. The glade was surrounded by an impenetrable wall of jungle that would prevent the boy from wandering.

It was a glorious morning for a walk. A light breeze sang in the foliage overhead ; and the sun glinted down on the pathway with splashes of gold, making the dewy ferns sparkle. The lingering regret she felt at missing the conjuror's exhibition disappeared as soon as the forest closed in around her. She had never been present at a performance of the basket trick. Now she came to think over it, she could not recall a single instance of ever having seen an Indian juggler at work. Perhaps if the man could be prevailed upon to stay another day, she might have the opportunity of judging for herself how far hypnotism entered into the juggling trickery. From all she had heard, she was convinced that the art was known and used to produce some of the marvellous effects.

Meanwhile Billy must be found.

The path rose and fell in gentle slopes, turning aside from a giant trunk or big rock that obstructed the way, and avoiding the swampy bed of a mountain stream.

Gay moved quickly. Now and then she stopped and listened, standing motionless, where the jungle was not quite so thick as in other parts.

" Billy ! Billy-o ! Billee ! "

Something rustled in the undergrowth. It was a nesting

bird that was disturbed by her sudden call. Far off on the slopes above a sambur deer, that was dozing in its leafy bower after a full meal at dawn on the patana grass, lifted its head with a startled snort, and sniffed the wind.

Gay reached the end of what she was wont to call her path. No sign of the child was visible. She called many times, but there was no response, except the rustling of the leaves under the wing of a bird, or the crackling of twigs as the wild pig rooted its way along in search of grubs. She began to doubt if he had strayed into the forest at all. Might he not have passed down the garden path and wandered through the tea in the direction of the far-off native shops? In that case the gardeners would find him, or a returning cooly might bring him back.

Then she remembered that she had not told Helen of her failure to discover her errant son within the house and garden; but this, of course, Helen would learn from Pedro.

She stood at the point where her own path ended and the jungle track began, debating in her mind whether she should go further. She remembered that the gardener had seen Billy near the forest and that the child's request to be taken was refused. Was it probable that Billy had persevered and followed up further? It was such rough going that she was convinced that if he had done so he could not get very far.

She looked at her watch. It was just eleven. She decided to go a mile further. Three miles would be the utmost of Billy's walking power. He was only six years old, and hunger for his midday meal would bring him homewards if nothing else.

The track narrowed suddenly, and became more tortuous in its winding. The wildness of the scenery increased, and there was less sign of the use of the axe.

The way was familiar to Gay for many miles onward. To the right, on the other side of the shoulder of the mountain, ten miles distant, was a valley that had been cleared and planted up with tea. In bygone days when she was not so fully occupied with the children, she had ridden over to see friends in that direction, starting before sunrise and reaching home at sunset.

At one point in the track there was a small bit of patana,

about a couple of acres in extent. A streamlet passed through it and spread into a wide pool near the path. It was the drinking fountain of the wild beasts of the forest. The deer came to it from all quarters. So also did the pig and jackal. The treacherous leopard also crept up from the warmer valleys below, not to slake its thirst, but to prey upon the timid creatures that came to drink.

Gay knew the pool well, for she had often ridden by; and on her longer journeys she made it a halting-place to take a cup of hot coffee from her thermos flask. She thought of the pool as she tramped steadily on. She could not remember that she had ever led Billy as far as that; certainly she had not done so walking; but she might have passed it riding with the boy on the saddle in front. The pool was at least four miles from the bungalow, and the child would never have walked that distance alone, even if he remembered it.

At the end of half an hour she stopped. She reckoned that she was still half a mile from the pool. She gave the call, repeating it three or four times, and listening intently for any sound that could be construed into a reply.

She was about to retrace her steps when faintly on the breeze came a distant cry; the voice that responded was not the voice of a child. It was the clear, deep call of a man. She answered it with a prolonged "Ah! yoh!" making the last syllable into a signal well known to her brother and many of her friends.

Above the rustling of the trees overhead came the answer; and Gay knew that it was her brother who was coming back from his long tramp through the jungle.

The relief to her mind was great. A load was lifted, and the forest seemed full of light. Of course Billy was with Fred. There could be no doubt about it, though how he had managed to carry the child she could not imagine. Anyway the little fellow would be dog-tired, and so would Fred be, handicapped as he was with a foot partially disabled through an accident when he was a boy.

Gay sat down to rest, choosing a rock that cropped out of the ground in the very centre of the path. Now that the excitement of the hunt was over, and her mind freed of anxiety, she realized that she was tired. She had been

busy over the flowers from breakfast until the time Billy was discovered to be missing, and then she had started out at once. This was the first time she had sat down during the morning.

She had to wait some time before Fred appeared, and then she saw that he was not alone. But his companion was not Billy. On that narrow track it was only possible to walk single file. Instead of Billy, a man taller and sturdier in every respect than Goldenham strode with long easy tread behind.

It was Geoffrey Charnes, whose estate adjoined Goldenham's, being divided only by the river.

"Hello! Gay! what are you doing so far from the bungalow?" asked Fred, in mild surprise.

"Looking for Billy Loveden," she replied abruptly, her previous anxiety surging back upon her with something like a shock. "I can't find him anywhere. I thought—I hoped the child was with you."

"With me! I've been the deuce of a long way; much too far for Billy to walk. I saw him as I started, and told him I couldn't take him with me this morning."

"I thought the boy might have followed you."

Gay had paid little attention to Charnes, who stood passive and silent as the brother and sister talked. His eyes rested on Gay; he could see that she was troubled. He broke in now.

"If Billy had followed Fred we should have found him on our way back. Don't worry yourself, Gay. He is sure to turn up all right."

"Probably he went down the estate path, and made for the river," added Fred. "Come home to lunch, and I'll eat my hat if he isn't there by this time as hungry as a hunter."

Gay thought of the pool.

"You are sure that he wasn't playing near the water-hole?" she asked, looking to Charnes rather than her brother for a reply.

"Cocksure!" he returned confidently.

They started on their homeward journey, Goldenham leading the way and setting the pace. His foot pained him, and he was going lamer than usual.

"Fred! you ought to have taken the pony," exclaimed Gay, who was just behind him.

"I've been where no pony could climb," replied Fred.

"Where was that?"

He was too weary to answer, and Charnes took upon himself to explain.

"Fred and I have been to look at some timber high up on the hill which we hope to persuade the Government to let us cut out for building up the dam. It will give us more water power for our tea factories."

"Will the timber be suitable?"

"It is just what we want. Now we must get permission from the forest officer to fell it. We marked the trees to-day. It won't hurt the forest in the least to cut them out."

"Do good, I should say," put in Goldenham.

Geoffrey Charnes was some years older than Gay. On the outbreak of the war he, with many other planters, offered his services like Loveden. Charnes had been refused; and he was told that he would serve his country best by remaining in the island. Level-headed men with a long experience of the Sinhalese were needed up-country, where an element of hidden danger lay in the strong-charactered adventurous hillmen. They had been conquered and brought under a foreign rule less than a hundred years ago. The yoke still galled, and the dream of emancipation had not died out. With the outbreak of the European war the discontent had been secretly fomented; and the hillmen's thoughts were directed towards a revival of the old times when Kandian kings had sway. There was an ancient saying among the Sinhalese of the mountains to the effect that if a ploughman were scratched a king would be found.

By what means this undercurrent of disloyalty was fostered the police could not discover. Its existence was shown in the aggressive bearing of the inhabitants of many of the hill villages. On the cart road it was noticeable in the want of courtesy on the part of the drivers of the bullock carts. They deliberately held up the more rapid traffic by continuing their way in the centre of the road, and thus preventing motors and horse-drawn vehicles from passing. The wall of rock on the one hand and the steep slopes on the other gave no marginal room; and until the cart was drawn

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to its proper side, nothing could pass. Complaint of this discourtesy only produced abuse, sometimes accompanied by muttered threats. The hot-headed planter would have liked to have taken matters into his own hands; but this would not do. The hill Sinhali was never better pleased than when he could lodge a complaint of assault against the European.

Charnes knew the temperament of the Sinhalese, and he also spoke their language. In addition he was restrained in his action and clear in his judgment; he possessed the keen sense of justice that is the Englishman's virtue. So he was told to remain where he was; and a hint was given that he might be able to assist Government if he kept in touch with the villages of his district; and gathered any information that would be of use in calming popular irritation and promoting peace.

Charnes had lived in Ceylon—with occasional trips home—for many years; he had known Gay ever since she was a child, and Fred from the time the boy came out to help his father on the estate.

Fred was some years older than Gay; and when his father died, he was able to carry on the work of the estate under the direction of Charnes, his near neighbour.

Mrs. Goldenham did not long survive her husband. The brother and sister inherited Toona Kelli and settled down to the placid life of tea-planting, Gay keeping house for Fred, who up to the present time had shown no disposition to take a wife.

Charnes's estate, named Wanna Wella, possessed the same quality for growing a high-class grade of tea as Goldenham's land; and there was a friendly, good-natured rivalry between them over the prices they made in the market.

"Shall we stop and rest a bit?" asked Gay, as they reached the beginning of Gay's walk.

"No; let's push on," replied Fred, to whom the suggestion had been made. He was sensitive over his infirmity, and did not like to be reminded that he was not quite as able as other men. "I can manage this last bit; the going is much easier than the track above."

They tramped on, Geoffry and Gay doing most of the talking, which circled round the new dam with its promise

of increased water power and the consequent improvements that might be made in the two factories.

Forty minutes later they arrived at the bungalow. The bell was ringing for the midday meal, which meant dinner for the children. Helen met them in the verandah, and greeted the weary trio as they climbed the steps.

"You look tired to death," remarked Helen Loveden, her eyes on Fred.

"Has Billy turned up?" asked Gay.

"No; haven't you found him?" replied Helen quickly.

"Not seen a sign of him, the little scamp!" said Geoffry.

"He must have gone down the estate. We shall have to look in that direction."

"Lunch first, whatever you do," said Nurse Catherine, coming up to the group. "Go all of you and get ready. The cook is dishing up now, this very minute."

"Don't look so anxious, Mrs. Loveden," said Fred, as he passed on to his room.

"The boy can't be lost," added Charnes, as he prepared to follow Fred.

"We must hunt the lower paths—and the river-bank," said Gay.

"It has been done," said Helen. "The two gardeners and the syce have been ever so far along the estate paths—quite halfway to the cart road; and we have sent out the young ayah with her husband to go, if necessary, as far as the native shops to make inquiries. Naughty little Billy! I shall have to punish him when he comes back. Gay! How deadly tired your brother looks!"

"Does he? Let's have some food, and then we shall all feel better. Hope Billy is properly hungry. It will be a lesson to him, dear wicked little chap! not to go wandering off by himself again."

CHAPTER III

THE children were in no way disturbed by the sight of Billy's empty chair; but their elders were not so easy in their minds. Fred was too tired to do anything but rest. He nibbled at his food, and before lunch was finished he asked to be excused. Nurse Catherine and Helen both watched him out of sight, and the former remarked on the foolishness of attempting to walk so far with a disabled foot. Helen turned on Geoffry suddenly.

"Why did you let him do it, Mr. Charnes?"

"I could not stop him," he replied, somewhat taken aback. "He had to see the timber for himself, and mark out what he wanted."

"Couldn't you have chosen it for him?" demanded Helen.

"By-the-bye, how did the conjuror get on after I left?" asked Gay, before Geoffry could reply.

"Splendidly!" cried one of the little girls. "He made ducks swim by themselves——"

"And Ramaswamy bowed to us, all by himself——" put in a second.

"And a little white bird came out of the man's cloth!" said a third, in a shrill voice.

Gay turned from one to another with smiling eyes.

"So, then, he earned his five rupees. Sorry I wasn't there to see it all. Did you have the basket trick?"

"Yes; and, oh! the poor man did scream when the other one poked the basket with his sword!"

"And Pearl cried!" said another, pointing to the solemn-faced mite who had only lately arrived.

"She is too young to see a conjuror," remarked one of the older children. "She has no nerve."

The elders smiled at the expression, and Gay said :—

“It must all be performed over again to-morrow. I want to see it myself.”

“Oh! but the man is gone!” cried three or four of the children together, in tones of disappointment. “He has taken all his snakes with him.”

Nurse Catherine explained the situation.

“He went off in a great hurry as soon as I had paid him the five rupees you left with me. I asked him to stay, and so did Pedro; but he could not be persuaded even though I offered him more money.”

“They all do that—pass on their way as if they were catching a train,” said Gay, as she rose from the table. She turned to the butler. “Pedro, I want to see the gardeners. Also tell the syce to saddle the pony for me.” She looked at Geoffry, who had pushed his chair away from the table, but was still seated. Unlike the jugglers, he was in no hurry to leave. “Good-bye, Geoff; I must be off on my boy-hunt.”

“Which way are you going?” he asked, rising quickly.

“Back into the forest; but I shall ride this time. I’ve had enough walking for this morning; and so have you, for that matter. If the child has wandered on the estate he will be found and brought home by a cooly; but he won’t be found in the forest unless he is searched for.”

“He can’t be there.”

Gay’s mouth closed a little more firmly as she fixed her eyes on his.

“Where do you think he is?” she asked.

“Down the valley.”

“What about the river, Gay?” asked Helen Loveden, who was looking distracted over her lost little son.

“Pedro has sent men to hunt the banks. The water is shallow just now, and not dangerous.”

“The turbine dam?”

“He could not possibly climb over the fence, and the gate is locked.”

Gay held out her hand in farewell to Geoffry Charnes.

“I’m coming with you,” he said.

“There is no necessity. You have already had a long walk. I know the forest as well as I know the back of my hand.”

"I dare say you do, little chum"—it was his pet name for her when she was small. "All the same I am coming with you."

"No! I won't have it!" cried Gay, her opposition roused still more by the use of a term that reminded her of her childhood when he was better able to control her impulses. "You've had enough of the hills to-day. Good-bye!"

Charnes took the hand she persistently held out to him. She gripped his fingers with decisive dismissal.

"Good-bye; come up to tennis on Saturday as usual. By that time we shall have found the truant."

There was a twinkle of triumph in Gay's eye as she bade him farewell and gave him the invitation. She went to her room to change into a tweed coat and divided skirt that served as riding habit and walking kit as well; for she had adopted the modern style of sitting a horse. The only difference between her saddle and the one used by her brother was the addition of a small padded seat in front. This Gay had had put on for the use of a child, should she wish to take one with her.

Ten minutes later she had mounted the pony and was riding up the path. The greater part of the way had to be taken at walking pace, as it was nowhere level. Towards the end of the cleared track she was able to push on a little faster.

At the point where the clearing ended the figure of a man stood alpenstock in hand, awaiting her approach.

"I told you you were not to come," cried Gay, on coming up with Charnes, and there was a faint note of annoyance in her tone which did not escape his ear.

"Forgive me if I refused to take my marching orders. Why should I be denied the pleasure of a walk with you?" he asked in a conciliating voice.

Her eyes smiled, if her lips did not. How could she be angry with an old friend like Geoff?

"What about Wanna Wella? You know you ought to be in the tea-house this afternoon. If this week's break is under-fermented or over-fired, it will serve you right."

"Don't be angry with me—dear!"

They were pushing their way through the narrow track, he with his hand on the saddle in danger of being

thrust aside by the pony into the jungle that brushed him continually.

"You talk to me, Geoff, as if I were only ten years old," she said severely. "Please remember that I was twenty on my last birthday."

"Twenty! Jeru——!" Geoffry rarely completed the name of the holy city. It was his only expression, and had to serve for surprise, pleasure, and even pain. "So sorry, Miss Goldenham. Will you forgive me if I assure you that, far from thinking you only ten years old, I am getting into the shocking habit of considering you to be nearly forty—my age!"

Gay's eyes suddenly laughed, and then her lips followed suit.

"Oh! Geoff, you old silly! Really you are the limit!"

"The limit in what?" he asked, purposely ignoring the slang; but she would not reply. "So you really expect to find that poor little laddie at the waterhole! as if a wee mite of that age could walk all that distance!"

Gay was unprovided with a reason for her belief that the child had gone into the forest rather than down the valley. She had no great fear of the river. It was the forest that had its lure for the boy; and into the forest she was convinced he went, hoping to overtake Fred, whom he saw depart to keep his appointment with Charnes.

The sun had passed the zenith, and his path was beset with golden-headed clouds.

"Are we going to have a thunderstorm?" asked Gay, after a long silence.

"I think not; the clouds are too high."

They reached the open space and Gay pulled up. She called Billy as she had done before. Geoffry also shouted; but beyond disturbing a monkey sunning itself on a ledge of rock, they heard nothing.

The waterhole lay like a sheet of glass in its green setting. In the mud at its edge were the footprints of deer and pig, as well as jackal. Through the long coarse grass ran several narrow, but well-defined, tracks, starting out from the pool to all points of the compass.

Gay dismounted, and she and Charnes searched the side of the pool for the small footmark that would betray the

wanderings of the child. When this was finished, Charnes inquired if she intended going further; and if so, which way she wished to take.

"I shall ride to the elephant rocks," she replied with decision. "I think, if I remember right, I once took Billy there on the pony; and I have a fancy that he may have gone in that direction."

Geoffry Charnes looked unconvinced, but did not attempt to dissuade her.

"Then, if you follow that track, I will go up this path which leads to Devala," he said. "Shall we meet here in an hour's time? You won't lose yourself in the jungle, will you?"

His eyes rested on her with a shadow of anxiety, although his lips smiled. She laughed at him outright.

"You dear old idiot!" she exclaimed. "Of course I shall not lose myself. Don't I know the forest between this and Devala as well as I know my own garden!"

Devala was the place on the other side of the mountain where Gay occasionally spent the day with friends.

"I am not sure," he replied soberly. "It is extraordinary how easily one may be lost in the jungle if there are many game tracks."

"Look! I've brought my whistle. If I'm lost, you will hear it scream. But I have a reliable guide in the pony. He will find his way back if I can't."

She remounted, refusing Geoffry's assistance, and he watched her as she rode towards the jungle and disappeared behind the green foliage. With her eyes searching every nook and corner for signs of the little figure, she had not another thought for the faithful friend of her childhood.

Gay always preferred to have the forest to herself. To her lively imagination it contained an inexhaustible store of romance. She liked to fancy what it might have been in primeval days when the gigantic sloth and mastodon haunted its deep recesses; when the giant beasts fought titanic battles and slew each other, before man came and made war upon the animal world. What tragedies might not have taken place! The forest knew how to keep its secrets. It was faithful to those who placed their trust in it. Even in these later days it had its mysteries. The honey-gatherer

followed the bee to rob it of its sweetness, and sometimes never returned. The shikaree pursuing the deer disappeared with his quarry, and was never seen again. And now, here was Billy, a child who could not be very far away from the beaten track, hidden from view and temporarily lost.

To Charnes the forest was nothing more than a timber reserve. As he tramped through it the instinct of the cultivator was strong within him. He could have turned the land to better account if he were permitted to fell the trees and plant it up with tea. In a couple of years the undulating slopes of rich forest soil would be smooth as velvet with pruned bushes that each year would bring more wealth to the careful planter.

Charnes continued the search conscientiously, not because he expected to find the child, but because Gay desired it. He looked at his watch. It was three o'clock. At four he would be back at the pool. Now and then he stopped to listen as he caught the faint sound of Gay's call. "Billy-o ! Billee ! Where are you, Billy-o ?" Her voice was lost at length in the jungle.

"I wish I had gone with her," he said to himself as he plodded up a steep game track. He added with a sigh, "But she didn't want me."

Gay rode briskly along a track that maintained a fairly even altitude. Not a yard of the path had any pretence to be called level. It was all up and down in gentle slopes that were negotiable by the pony.

She reached a point where the natural rock cropped out and rose to a height of fifty feet. At the foot of the rock lay a pile of boulders, some not larger than the pony she rode ; others the size of the huge cromlechs that excite the wonder of travellers in various parts of the world. The spot was known as the elephant rocks. Here in the old days, before the shy beasts were driven away by the sound of the woodman's axe and the chattering transport bearers, the elephants had been wont to stable themselves and shelter from the rain and wind.

Gay turned and twisted round the rocks, threading her way in and out, as she avoided boulder and tree-trunk. The light of the sun fell in patches, illuminating the dry, dusty soil where ferns and moss found no place.

The air was tainted with the scent of furry creatures that made their lairs under the shelter of the warm rocks. The pony pricked its ears and snorted its dislike to such odours.

Gay called again, and her shouts would have driven away the jungle cat and jackal if any had been lurking near.

She came to the end of the rocks, and was about to follow up the track a little further, when she thought she heard a faint whimper. Was it a jackal cub forsaken by its mother ? or a young monkey in the arms of a frightened parent high up on a ledge of the precipice ?

She turned the pony and rode back to the boulder-strewn ground below the wall of rock. Then she called again, and the answering whimper came in the unmistakable sound of human weeping. It was to the right of her. She left the track, always keeping the face of the guiding precipice in view.

Calling and listening, she pushed her way through the maze of boulders, with here and there a bush, not sufficiently thick to arrest her progress.

Suddenly she heard a feeble cry above her ; and, looking up, beheld a pitiable object seated on the top of a big boulder.

It was Billy, sobbing in exhaustion. The tears ran down cheeks that were stained with long and continuous weeping. His bare legs hung over the edge of the rock at a distance of six or seven feet from the ground. They were streaked with blood, where the leeches had attacked him. He was a most unhappy self-commiserating boy, to whom fate, in his opinion, had been extremely unkind. It did not cross his small mind that he had only himself to thank for being in such a grave predicament.

"Billy ! Oh, Billy !" gasped Gay, astonished at her discovery in spite of her conviction that he was to be found somewhere in the forest. "You naughty child ! how did you get there ?"

Relief at seeing a chance of speedy rescue, together with the scolding that he knew he merited, opened the floodgates of his tears afresh, and he howled aloud.

"Stop crying this minute," commanded Gay. "I shall not take you down from there till you are quiet."

Billy controlled himself with an effort. The thought of having to remain where he was terrified him into silence.

"Have you done crying?" asked Gay, severely, as she brought the pony close enough to the rock to reach him.

A tearful "yes" was the reply.

She left the reins loose on the pony's neck and reached upward. The utmost she could do was to touch his feet.

"Slip down into my arms," she cried.

"Can't!" wailed Billy. "Too long way down!"

"Come along at once," she said, pulling at his feet. "Let yourself go; I shall catch you all right. Come!"

She gave him a firm tug and in another moment he was safe in her arms, and seated on the small pad in front of her. The movement caused the leech bites to bleed afresh. With the red blood came the tears again.

"Jackals bite Billy!" he wailed.

"Leeches, not jackals. Of course, they bite naughty little boys who run into the forest all by themselves. How did you get up to the top of that rock?" asked Gay, as she scanned the boulder.

"I climbed up," said Billy.

"Nonsense! not even a monkey could get up the face of that boulder. Which way did you climb up?"

"That way round," he replied, pointing vaguely half round the compass.

Guy walked the pony further on, and soon found herself against the wall of crag that reared its head far above the forest trees. No foothold was visible for even an expert climber. She turned and explored the other side of the boulder, where progress was stopped by a dense growth of thorns.

"You're not telling the truth, Billy."

"I are!" he maintained sturdily.

"Oh! well, never mind now. We will talk about that later on. It's time to be getting back to tea," she remarked, more to herself than the child.

The pony moved at a steady pace, but it was impossible to go fast. She was a little late in reaching the waterhole. Charnes was there, pacing restlessly up and down the track leading into the forest, and listening for her. He was

unfeignedly glad to see her, and astounded at the sight of the boy.

"You seem very much relieved that I've returned safely," she said.

"I am," he replied simply. "Where did you find the boy?"

"Perched on one of the big boulders at the elephant rocks."

He stared at her in astonishment.

"How did he get there?" he asked.

"I climbed up out of reach of the jackals. Look! they bite me! Naughty jackals!" said Billy, the corners of his mouth turning down with another threatening of tears.

Charnes looked at Gay with inquiry.

"How high was the boulder?" he asked.

"I could only just reach him as I sat on the pony. I pulled him down by his feet into my arms."

"Somebody put you there, Billy," said Charnes.

The child shook his head violently, and repeated his tale two or three times. "I climbed up all by myself."

"Some passing cooly must have found him and tossed him up on the rock out of harm's way," said Gay. "Let's be moving home. I want my tea. Billy ought to be famished; he has had no dinner."

She started the pony at a brisk walk, and Charnes, with his hand upon the saddle, maintained his place by her side.

"What I should like to know," he said presently, "is how he managed to get as far as the elephant rocks. They are fully five miles from the bungalow. It is an impossible distance for a little chap of his age to walk."

"I rode," announced Billy, unexpectedly taking a part in the conversation.

"Pig-a-back?" inquired Charnes.

"Yes; on a geegee, pig-a-back."

"Ah! I thought so! The young scamp has been carried into the jungle by some estate cooly or one of the Sinhalese woodcutters working at the timber-felling higher up. The boy was left on the rock in the hope of a reward being offered. After sunset he would have been brought to the bungalow and the reward claimed."

Gay looked at him with consternation as she asked—

"Would they dare to do such a thing?"

"These up-country Sinhalese will dare anything just now, particularly if it is something that will annoy a European. I distrust their loyalty and good faith towards the British."

They were silent as the pony went gingerly down a steep bit of the path that was covered with loose bits of rock. As soon as they reached the cleared portion of the path the going was easier.

"We must watch Master Billy more carefully," observed Gay, presently. "Billy, if you go riding pig-a-back on strange coolies we shall have to put you in the corner."

"Geegee said Billy was a good boy!" replied the child, in an aggrieved tone.

"Coolies can't talk English," said Gay, rather severely. "Did the geegee put you on the rock?"

"He lifted me up so that I could climb," said Billy, sticking closely to the story. He was naturally a truthful boy, with plenty of courage; Gay had never known him to be otherwise. "And he did say 'good boy!' he did. I are a good boy, Gay!"

"You mean to be a good boy, darling; but you must never go into the forest again by yourself."

"You have taken grave responsibilities on yourself, Gay, in adopting such a large family. I hope they won't prove too much for you," said Charnes.

She glanced round at him. "You don't like children," she said.

"Indeed you are mistaken!" he protested. "I don't enthuse over them, and possibly I might be more interested in some than in others."

"You mean whether they were nice or naughty."

"Not exactly. It would depend on whose children they were."

"My love for the little people is not qualified by any such consideration. I love them all, no matter whose they are, and how naughty they may be. They are darlings, one and all."

Was it possible that the child before her understood the full meaning of her words? It was strange that at that precise moment he should lean back against her, put up his

little hand to her neck, and draw her head down, so that he might reach her lips. She stooped over him and kissed him.

Charnes watched the action with a curious stirring at his heart. Before Gay could lift her head again, his eyes were on the path in front of him.

Tea was in progress when they reached the bungalow. At the sound of the pony's hoofs there was a stampede into the verandah. Questions were showered upon Gay as she dismounted. They were not answered beyond the reply given by Charnes that the missing Billy had been found at the elephant rocks.

Helen Loveden seized her son from Geoffrey's arms and kissed the child with lips that quivered. Her eyes dwelt gratefully on Gay with a look that expressed her gratitude. Then she caught sight of the leech bites and stained socks, and with an exclamation of pity she hurried off to her room to change Billy's clothes and wash him. Gay followed, while Catherine shepherded the scattered flock back to the tea-table.

Charnes joined Fred in his office room where another tea-table was spread, and the door closed on the two men. Charnes related what had taken place, and they discussed the probabilities. They were more concerned with the motive that prompted the action than with the child's distress and fright. Goldenham was of the opinion that it had been done for the sake of a reward; by whom, he could not say. There were the travelling coolies passing from estates to the railway. There were the Gipsies, a tribe of which happened to haunt the forest at that time; and there were the Sinhalese.

"I don't think the Gipsies or the Tamil coolies would venture to decoy a child away for the purpose of getting a reward," said Charnes. "But I can quite believe that the Sinhali in his present humour might have done it; and, what is more, I am inclined to think that it was one of Asseri's men. The village is not more than ten miles from here. The elephant rocks are halfway. It was the thought of Asseri's people that made me go with Gay, though I could see that she didn't like it."

"I must tell Gay about Asseri."

"No; don't do that. She doesn't go far into the jungle

at any time, and it would spoil all her pleasure if you made her nervous," said Charnes.

"Gay isn't given to nerves. All the same, perhaps you are right. Nothing need be said about Asseri and his disagreeable attitude until we have more facts to act upon," said Fred, who knew Gay well enough to be sure that she would laugh at their fears, and refuse point blank to give up her walks and rides in the forest.

Helen attended to her little son, while Gay lent a hand in supplying her with fresh clothes. Billy had been promoted to shorts and a tunic. Gay carried off the soiled garments to be washed by the ayah. She turned out his diminutive pockets before throwing the tiny breeches into the water. The result was a piece of string, a peach-stone, half a banana, two or three sticky sweets, and the fragments of a biscuit from one pocket. In the other she found a neatly folded scrap of paper. She opened it. Written in pencil were a few words in English. She read them in blank astonishment, hardly believing her eyes as she did so. They ran as follows :—

"For the love of God, come to the elephant rocks !"

CHAPTER IV

THE following morning as dawn was breaking Gay came quietly out of the bungalow. She wore the coat and skirt that served as riding habit and she moved with care. It was Saturday and too early to disturb the children. The later they slept the better pleased were their elders. The day was quite long enough from seven in the morning to seven at night ; at which hour they were all "shoo'ed off to biddy-bo," as they called the rounding up at bedtime.

Gay had had a cup of tea, and had ordered the pony to be saddled. She carried the slip of paper she had taken from Billy's pocket ; and as she stepped down into the dewy garden from the raised verandah to go to the stables, she examined the mysterious message in the dim light of the dawn.

She had not mentioned her discovery to any one. Her pity and consideration for the trouble of another, even though he was unknown to her, kept her silent. It was not her secret to give away.

The writing was strange and disorderly. The pencil had been used violently so that the paper was pierced by the point in places. The letters, though clearly formed, were large and straggling and sloped at all angles. The writing showed agitation and disturbance of mind on the part of the writer.

"It must be a boy's hand," said Gay to herself. "Poor boy ! Some country-born lad who is in trouble and hiding from the police. I wonder if he wants money ?" She stopped, but moved on immediately. "No ; I won't take any money with me. I can easily bring it another morning if it is needed."

She mounted at the stable and rode away as swiftly as

the path would allow. The sun was still below the horizon and its rays had not yet reached the hilltops. Gay loved the mountains and the forest in every phase: but none appealed to her more than the early morning aspect when night was giving place to day. It was the hour when all the creatures of the dark sought their hiding-places to get away from the revealing light of the sun. It seemed as though they possessed an inner consciousness of their own unlovely appearance, and sought to conceal an ugliness that could only repress.

Full as the forest might be during the day, it was still more alive with animate things in the dark hours when the cold clammy underground world came out to play and breathe the humid air. The large brown earthworm, snake-like in its movement, the pale stupid grub, the long centipede with horny legs and scales, the hammer-headed slug with its cruel quivering jaws armed with fine sharp teeth possessed the ground where, during the sunny hours, the butterfly curtsied with gorgeous wing on the freshly opened blossom, and the gay-plumaged bird scratched and picked at the soft leaf-mould under the trees.

Bats and owls, snakes and furtive rats, jungle cats and small furry field mice preyed upon that world of insects and reptiles until the first streak of dawn warned them that it was time to seek the cool dark recess of fissured rock and hollow trunk or the deep burrow in the earth.

Gay in her childhood had associated the reptiles, crawling grubs, beetles, slugs, and worms with evil spirits. Legend and story had been poured into her ear by her ayah in her young days; and though her education at an English school at home had taught her not to believe in the existence of rock and tree demons, she could not help being conscious of what she called a creepy sensation as she thought of that unseen world of active life that took possession of her forest under cover of the darkness.

She drew the cool, crisp air into her lungs and looked up at the sky. It was already showing a broad streak of rosy light that was reflected on the grey trunks of the trees. Then her eyes rested on the big giants, and in their depths was a smile of greeting. All night, it seemed to her, they had kept vigil over the delicate flower buds, the orchids and

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the ferns, the sleeping blossoms and the butterflies. Now with returning day, their duty done, the titans might doze and murmur a sleepy lullaby in the breeze that swept over their crowns, and slumber if they pleased in the warmth of the midday sun.

She knew each tree, whether it was a hoary old giant bearing its load of parasites—moss, lichen, creeper and orchid—or the young growing tree that was to replace the giant when it fell dead and decayed where it stood.

Saturday with Gay was a busy day. By general consent it was a half holiday in the valley and her "At Home" day. Early in the afternoon visitors arrived from all directions. They were sure of a warm welcome, and they remained till sunset; longer if there was a moon to light them back.

Tea was ready in the drawing-room at three o'clock; for many of them had breakfasted at eleven, and had started at noon to walk or ride the long distance that separated them from their hospitable friends.

After tea the guests drifted down to the tennis courts, built by Fred's father on a piece of level ground near the river. Cool drinks, cigars, fruit, and cake were ready in the kiosk that stood on a terrace above the ground and overlooked the courts.

The children loved these gatherings. They hovered about, fielding balls and playing games of their own. Gay herself enjoyed them as much as any one. She knew what a pleasure they were to the lonely planters living in remote parts of the district, where they did not see a European from one week's end to another; and how the social gathering helped the exiles to face the loneliness and monotony of their lives. It was something for them to look forward to. The same warm welcome awaited them as often as they liked to seek it.

She reached the waterhole, and her quick eye caught sight of the fresh tracks made by the wild creatures that had come to drink in the very early hours before she had started. Had she been thirty minutes sooner she might have caught sight of a fine sambur deer that had just come from browsing on the patana grass to drink before burying itself deep in the jungle out of reach of its dreaded enemy man. The mud at the edge of the water was churned up

by the hoofs of wild pig. On the top of these was the imprint of the leopard's pad. The treacherous brute had crept, catlike, up to the pool and perhaps had sprung upon a young pigling straying from its mother's side and carried it off to its den among the rocks.

Gay did not linger by the waterhole, but turned off in the direction of the elephant rocks. She had no time to waste if she was to get back to breakfast. The path was rough and of necessity the pace was slower. The pony scrambled over the slippery face of buried rock and skidded down inclines carrying a bushel of loose stones under his iron shoes. The soft note of the wild pigeons caught her ear. The birds were high up in the forest where the sun would find them as soon as it mounted over the crest of the mountain.

She arrived at the rocks where the path twisted and turned to avoid the boulders and big trunks of the trees. She reined in the pony and listened. The pigeons were still calling and a jungle cock crowed. On a ledge of the cliff a monkey chattered; and the leaves of the trees overhead rustled as a jay suddenly discovered her presence and bustled away with a note of warning to all whom it might concern. There was no sign of the writer of the message.

She went on slowly until she had passed the region of the boulders and was once more buried between the walls of forest greenery. The path led to a Sinhalese village some five miles further on where the spurs of the mountain began to fall away towards the undulating forest tracts lying between the hills and the sea. They are visible from the deck of the ships as they pass to the south of the island, tracts that have never known the foot of the white man and rarely the foot of the brown.

For a mile she struggled on her way, obstructed here and there by a thorny branch or the rampant trail of a creeper. At the top of the ridge she stopped and listened once more. Then she called, as she had called Billy on the previous afternoon.

"Billy! Billy-o! Billee!"

There was no answer. At the end of ten minutes she turned the pony's head homewards. When she reached the elephant rocks she again stopped and searched on all sides for some sign of a human being. A spot of white lying near

a boulder attracted her attention. She dismounted and picked up a small piece of notepaper. It was blank and quite clean, as though recently thrown there. Part of it had been torn off. She pulled out the slip on which the message was written. It fitted in size and matched the paper in texture.

The person who had written the note had done so on the spot.

The morning breeze was blowing. As it swept across the trees it sang a soft song. Mingled with the sound came a faint wailing of pipes. She waited, standing by the pony. The animal's ears moved restlessly and once or twice it sniffed the air. Possibly the scent of the leopard still lingered as it went loping past with the pigling to its lair.

The piping ceased and still Gay listened motionless, eyes and ears as alert as the pony's. Suddenly there came into her vision a man. He seemed to have crept on the scene like some furtive animal. He stood with the stillness of the wild creature, ready to fly or to fight as occasion demanded.

Gay made no movement and the two regarded each other steadily. The man was an Asiatic Gipsy. The only garment he wore was a small loin cloth wrapped tightly round his waist. It fell halfway to his knees and was stained to a grey-brown colour closely resembling the tint of the rock. His beard and the shock of long thick hair on his head were uncombed. His deepset black eyes looked out from beneath bushy eyebrows that shaded his eyes like the brim of a cap.

Gay was not alarmed at the sight of him. She was aware that a tribe of Gipsies haunted the forests of that particular district at times when the rains were not falling and the jungle was fairly dry. She also knew that the Gipsy race was harmless, although honesty was not to be reckoned among their virtues. It was not the man himself who held her gaze. Coiled round his arm was a snake. The tail end curved about his neck; its body went twice round his arm, and its head and neck protruded from the light clasp of his hand. The reptile was at its ease and made no attempt to escape.

The pan-pipes she had heard were slung about his neck. He was a snake-charmer, a man who professed to catch snakes and remove them from any spot where their presence

was undesirable. It was said that they came at the call of his pipes, and allowed themselves to be taken by a deft movement accompanied by some danger if the captor were not expert. The tail was seized and the snake drawn through the other hand. The neck was gripped tightly so that the head was unable to turn and strike. With a pair of pincers the poison fangs were drawn and the cobra was rendered innocuous.

There were numerous stories of antidotes to be found in the forest ; also of magical stones that were supposed on application to draw out the poison from a bite ; but there was no doubt that the Gipsy in dealing with snakes thought the best way of all was to avoid being bitten.

Another popular belief was that the Gipsy possessed a wand made from a certain wood before which the cobra retreated. It was also believed that he could render himself immune by a long and patient system of inoculation. Whether it was the case with this wild man of the woods or not it was evident that neither he nor the snake had any fear of each other.

"Salaam, old father," said Gay, in the language of the estate cooly and bungalow servant.

At her words the Gipsy moved forward looking into her eyes with increasing curiosity.

"The lady is favoured of the gods," he remarked.

By the term gods he implied the rock and tree devils that belonged to his animistic creed.

"That is well," she replied. "Tell me how I am favoured by the gods?"

"The lady may walk in safety through the forest. She will see all things as they are. The swallower of stones spoke a true word when he said that he could not show his tricks to the lady."

"Tell me, old father," said Gay, who was only interested in the search for the writer of the message. "Does any Burgher boy live in the forest?"

"Others may see white men in the jungle, but the lady will see only the Gipsy."

"Is there no white man hiding in the forest?"

She gazed into his deepset eyes as though she would read his inner thoughts. The snake hissed. At the sound

she glanced swiftly at it. It had stretched its neck further through the grasp of the Gipsy's hand and had spread its hood. The beautiful spectacle mark on the hood was plainly visible. The snake had turned so that it faced her. Its glittering eyes were fixed upon her; and from its mouth protruded in a quick uncertain movement its forked tongue.

Gay did not shrink; but the Gipsy read in her gaze the momentary repulsion that she felt.

"The good snake will not hurt the lady," he said.

She nodded her head, construing his words into a tacit admission that he had drawn its fangs.

The Gipsy drew still nearer. He was gentle in all his movements as though well practised in the art of approaching shy creatures of the forest. He extended the hand that held the snake but kept it low. His action was not of the nature of a threat towards her nor just an idle attempt to rouse her fear. It was an experiment.

Gay knew enough about the habits of the cobra to be aware that it will not strike as a rule unless it is sure of its objective. Its fangs are so placed that to bite effectively it must be above the point where it intends to strike. The Gipsy held it low, and she was not in the least alarmed. The pony had not the same confidence. It drew back to the full length of its rein and snorted uneasily.

It was only natural that Gay should keep her eyes on the snake when it was so close to her. Slowly, very slowly, the hood contracted, the restless tongue ceased darting out towards her, and the cobra sank back until its long neck was withdrawn into its captor's hand. The head rested on the Gipsy's fingers like the head of a crouching dog on its paws.

At the action of the snake the Gipsy looked at it and back again at Gay with a curiosity he could not hide. She carried a small riding-cane slung upon her wrist. He took the cane in his hand in the same gentle manner and examined it. Then he dropped it as though disappointed. It was made of rattan, which has no magical property commanding the submission of serpents.

"The lady is favoured of the gods," he repeated. "And she may ride or walk where she chooses in the jungle."

Then like a jungle cat he turned with the intention of slipping away out of sight among the rocks.

"Stop!" cried Gay. "I want to speak. Tell me, old father, have you met a stranger and a white man in the forest lately?"

"There is no stranger in these jungles, lady. He would soon lose himself—and die—and be eaten by the wild boar."

Once more he prepared to depart.

"One word more! Did you see an English child here yesterday seated on a rock?"

"It was only this morning that I came here. Yesterday I was on the other side of the hill. How could I see an English child? It is snakes the Gipsy seeks; not the children of the white man."

"Why have you come here this morning?" asked Gay, wondering if the man had anything to do with Billy's disappearance. She found it difficult to connect him with the incident when she remembered the mysterious appeal brought home unwittingly by the child.

"There was trouble in the camp."

"Police trouble?" she asked quickly.

He looked sharply at her as he answered. "The police never trouble the Gipsies. Do they not make offering to the police of wild honey? It is the Sinhalese who give trouble."

The last remark was mumbled through his beard as he walked away. He took but a few steps, and then he disappeared from her view. Gay laughed.

"Funny old thing! He's like the Cheshire cat! Well, I must be off home or they will think I am lost."

She put her foot into the stirrup and swung herself into the saddle. The pony, with head towards the stable, needed no reminder to put its best foot forward.

Gay reached the waterhole and pulled up. Before taking the path down the hill she once more gave the call which she believed would carry the information that Billy's friend was at hand if the writer of the message still desired an interview. She had no expectation whatever of receiving an answer. She felt that she had done her part and had nothing on her conscience to accuse her of neglect. She had gone to the place the writer had himself appointed. He had

failed to appear. Now she must hurry home to the many duties that awaited her, and to the preparations for the guests she hoped to see that afternoon.

The sun had risen above the hills and was flooding the open space where the waterhole lay with a warm golden light. A few quail feeding in the long grass rose as the pony moved impatient of restraint and anxious to get back to its morning meal.

"Billy! Billy-o! Billee-e!" she shouted for the last time.

Far away, high in the mountain, came a faint response. It was unmistakably a human voice that called back.

"Oh! hoh! Billy! Billy-o! Billee!"

CHAPTER V

It was four o'clock in the afternoon of the same day. Tennis on the Toona Kelli courts was in full swing. The distant shouts of the players as they missed the ball or made a remarkably good shot came in at the drawing-room window. The children, catching the infection of high spirits, shouted in happy response as, led by Billy, they played touch-last up and down the paths and round the kiosk.

Gay was still seated at the tea-table in the bungalow. Geoffry had arrived late, and there were others who might yet appear to make demands on the teapot.

"I suppose you have not been able to extract any more information from Billy as to the person who carried him into the jungle? He could never have walked there by himself," said Charnes as he helped himself to a piece of cake. Then, as Gay did not immediately reply, he continued, "I say, this is a good cake! Is it the cook's masterpiece?"

"No; I made it myself this morning after breakfast. The cook baked it."

"You haven't told me if you squeezed any more news out of Billy that might help to solve the mystery of how he got so far into the jungle, and who put him on his perch yesterday."

"He has nothing more to tell. Further questioning is of no use. The other children suggested fairies and dragons and bold knights. His imagination has been stirred, and the latest story is that he rode on the back of a very big knight who held him while he climbed up all by himself to the top of the rock. His geegee told him to be a good boy till he was fetched. Billy declares in self-praise that he was very good until he saw the blood on his legs. Then he was frightened and began to cry."

"Fred and I are both of the opinion that it was done by a Sinhali woodcutter in the hope of a reward. At the same time the man may have intended to give the European a nasty fright. They are not very well disposed towards us just now. Wasn't Billy very hungry?"

"Not more than usual. He said he had had some dinner."

"Exactly so!" exclaimed Charnes. "The man gave him some of the food he carried for himself."

Gay recalled the fact that she had discovered fragments of biscuit when she had shaken out Billy's pocket. It was not the kind of food a hillman would be carrying; however, she did not make any allusion to it. The children were well fed and Gay did not encourage biscuits between meals.

"If a woodcutter was the origin of all this trouble and anxiety I can only say that he was guilty of a great impertinence in acting thus," she remarked.

"The hillman is quite capable of it. What do you think yourself, Gay?"

He looked keenly at her; but she avoided his eye. The sound of footsteps came from the verandah.

"Ring the bell, please, Geoff. Here are more visitors coming. I must have a pot of fresh tea."

Guests at Toona Kelli on Gay's At Home days walked in unannounced. The late arrivals were Oliver Campbell and his daughter Nellie. Like Charnes they were old friends and neighbours.

"So glad you were able to come," said Gay, as she greeted them warmly. "You are later than usual, and I was beginning to think that one of you must be ill."

"We were held up by a confounded native, a Sinhali from the other side of the hill. This fellow, Asseri by name, had the impudence to direct a gang of Gipsies doing transport for him, to encamp on the bank of a stream that runs through my estate. The spot was formerly waste land, but I have lately had it spaded over and holed for tea. It has been trampled down, and I shall have to dig it over again and rehole it."

Campbell poured out his indignation and wrath, drinking his tea and demolishing buttered tea-cake as though he were making a meal off the whole tribe of Gipsies.

"The Government Agent ought to have them cleared out! Don't you agree with me, Charnes?" he asked, turning to Geoffry.

"I have never found the Gipsies troublesome," responded Geoffry, as he aided Gay by handing dishes. "Their worst crime is pilfering fowls from the cooly lines; but as the coolies' chickens come from eggs stolen from their masters' bungalows, I can't say that I feel any animosity towards the tribe. Haven't you lost eggs now and then, Nellie?"

"Not I! I keep my fowls under lock and key where the coolies can't get at them," returned Nellie.

"But you don't keep your fowls under lock and key, Nell!" cried her father. He turned to Gay. "Would you believe it, I was out all yesterday; had to go down to Howard's place about some tea-seed, and hang me, if those old hens of Nellie's hadn't been out in the tea, and all over the garden! She hadn't seen them! Been busy making herself a frock in doors and bossing half a man she calls a tailor! I can't tell you the damage they've done."

"Oh, Daddy dear, not much; only just a little scratch here and there," said Nellie, gently.

"A little scratch here and there!" he repeated indignantly. "They have ruined the carrot bed and smashed half the young tomato plants. I'll have the whole lot killed if it happens again."

"What will you do for fresh eggs for your breakfast if you do, Dad?" returned Nellie, in no way abashed at the tale of her fowls' iniquity. "You know you can't eat bazaar eggs—they taste of garlic—and I never fail you."

"Poor Mr. Campbell!" said Gay, softly. "You have had some bad half-hours lately what with Asseri's Gipsies and Nellie's fowls."

It was very well known to Gay and others that Nellie was the most successful henwife in the valley. She managed even in the coldest and wettest monsoon never to be without a laying hen or a tender fowl for the table. As regularly as clockwork the fowls contrived somehow to escape from the henhouse and enjoy a day's healthy scratching whenever the master of the house had business that took him off the estate.

Nellie was always very repentant over the accident, and made many apologies and excuses for the careless servant who had left the door of the henhouse open. At her father's direction the boy was scolded and fined. Nellie took care, however, to return the fine privately out of the house-keeping money. The payment was entered in her accounts as "fowl food."

Gay and Nellie exchanged sympathetic glances, and Gay's deep grey eyes smiled; but the smile went no further. Charnes made a third in the telephonic exchange of thought; and old Oliver Campbell, who had returned to his vituperation of the Gipsy tribe, saw and suspected nothing.

"Where is Fred?" asked Nellie presently.

"On the courts arranging the games. If you have finished tea perhaps you would like to go down, and Fred will put you into a sett as soon as one of the courts is vacant."

At this moment Goldenham came in and greeted his guests. Nellie flushed at sight of him. The flush deepened as Helen Loveden followed.

"I saw you pass up the garden path and gave you time to have some tea," said Fred. "Nellie, I must put you into the next game."

"And I've come for more balls, Gay," explained Helen. "Don't trouble to fetch them. I know where to find the balls in your room."

She hurried off nodding to Campbell and his daughter, and was back in two minutes.

"Here they are!" she said. "Now we need not wait for the children to pick up those that go into the tea bushes."

Nellie rose at once, but Campbell had seated himself again.

"You will remain here, won't you, father?" asked Nellie.

"Not at all! Why shouldn't I come down to the courts with you? I want a pipe," he said; he jumped up and moved towards the verandah as his daughter intended he should.

Again Gay's eyes twinkled. Campbell's wife had been dead many years and he had grown autocratic and difficult to manage in his long-widowed bachelorhood; but Nellie

had learned how to get her way in most things, and she got it now as her father followed her through the French window into the broad verandah.

"Come along, Geoff," cried Fred, as he limped away.

"Yes, do go," added Gay. "I shall join you directly if no one else arrives."

Charnes followed, bringing up the rear. In the distance riding up the path through the tea he caught sight of a visitor, the last to arrive. It was John Smith, a man younger than himself, who for some time past had been working one of the smallest estates in the district. The wonder was how he made it pay sufficiently to keep a couple of good horses, a staff of first-rate servants and an excellent table. His open hospitality gave him a certain amount of popularity; but he was no favourite with the older men.

Charnes hesitated. If he had followed his inclination he would have turned back into the drawing-room. Not that he liked John Smith by any means. He resisted the impulse and followed Fred, walking at a few paces behind Campbell and his daughter. Helen and Fred were leading the way down the garden path, which would not admit of more than two people abreast.

"Mr. Goldenham, you will have to cut away some of those large tea bushes. They come up too close to the tennis courts, and the balls get lost among them," Helen was saying.

"Can't spare a single bush these hard times," replied Fred.

"You're right, Goldenham," put in Campbell. "Don't you allow a single stick of tea to be cut down. Very sorry, Mrs. Loveden, to be in opposition to you; but you must know, as a planter's wife——"

"Widow," corrected Helen, gently, and with a touch of pathos that stirred Goldenham's pity.

"Pardon!" murmured Campbell, feeling that he was on delicate ground, and out of his element in crossing swords with a young woman like Helen. "What I mean is that in these times we want every leaf we can make. Each tea bush is good for so many pounds of tea; and those by the courts are some of the finest on the estate; but you ladies never think beyond the bungalow. Now, here's my Nellie."

His Nellie, walking silent and thoughtful by his side, was not looking particularly happy. "Here's my Nell," he repeated, "always clamouring to have the hen-house yard enlarged. I can't spare the ground."

"The hen-house is too small, father, now that we have guinea fowls and turkeys as well," protested Nellie with sudden spirit.

Helen looked round and laughed. "Have it enlarged, Miss Campbell. I always considered the bungalow and everything belonging to it as my own private property to do what I liked with. Noel had the whole estate and I never interfered with his management of it. You do as you wish."

She said it with the manner of a pretty woman who gets her way with the men even when it is against their better judgment. Campbell, case-hardened as he was to the wiles of women, could not help laughing as he retorted—

"Didn't know poor Loveden had such a tartar in you; but your bark is worse than your bite, I'll be bound!"

"Billy takes after his mother in wanting his own way," remarked Fred to Nellie over his shoulder. "What do you think he did yesterday?"

He told the story of Billy's escapade. Nellie pressed forward to listen and Goldenham hung back till he was in line with her, so that he might have her undivided attention. This movement left Helen leading, and threw Charnes and Campbell together. Campbell was as much interested in the story as his daughter. When Fred had finished, he said—

"I'll bet it was one of those Gipsies, and that you've hit it off, Fred, when you say it was done for a reward. Can't we get the tribe to move off into another district?"

"The difficulty would be to keep them there," said Charnes. "They are always on the move. It is said that they never stop more than ten days in any place. Usually they go on a fresh camping ground at the end of a week. You will find them with their queer palm-leaf huts one morning in some glade or open space in the forest. A few days later not a vestige remains to show they were there except a heap of grey ashes where they have made hotpot of the fowls they have stolen from the coolies or the wild game they have trapped."

"Weren't you frightened, Mrs. Loveden, when Billy disappeared?" asked Nellie, looking curiously at the slim figure in front of her with its perfectly fitting black dress. The sombre colour was modified with a touch of white here and there. Noel Loveden had been dead for more than a year.

"She was crazy with anxiety," replied Fred for her. "I can assure you that I had the greatest difficulty in preventing her from running out to hunt for him among the tea."

"Yes," assented Helen, warmly. "I can't tell you how kind Mr. Goldenham was; but I am not afraid of the Gipsies. We had a tribe for months in the jungles near us. Noel found them very useful. They carried the tea down to the cart-road when he was short of coolies. He said they were extraordinarily honest, far more so than the Indian coolies. Nothing was ever lost or stolen that was committed to their care. We used to give them buttermilk and the surplus vegetables from the garden. There was a little bit of waste land by a stream on the estate where they could always encamp if they chose."

"A shocking bad thing for the district, Mrs. Loveden, to encourage such people. That's all I have to say!" said Campbell.

"Then perhaps you will approve of the conduct of my husband's successor. He behaved very differently. He sent them all packing, diverting the little mountain stream and digging up the waste piece of ground. I'm sorry for the poor things with every man's hand against them."

"Why don't they settle down and build villages for themselves like other tribes, and lead respectable community lives?" asked Campbell, who was not to be driven from the warpath by any sentimental appeal to his pity.

"The Sinhalese say that they are under the curse of the gods," continued Helen, who had resumed her place at Fred's side, Nellie having dropped back again to her father's side. "They are condemned to wander for the sin of an ancestor. He was catching snakes in the forest with his pan-pipes, and making them dance—that is, sway backwards and forwards to the piping. One of the Hindu gods had taken the form of a cobra with a thousand hoods. He heard the wail of the pipes, and was forced by reason of the snake nature he had

assumed to come out of the rocks and dance with the other cobras. The god was furiously angry at the indignity put upon him, as he was aware that the man recognized his divinity by the number of hoods. When the snake charmer was tired of piping he stopped and the many-headed cobra escaped; but before disappearing the god cursed the man and said that he and his descendants should never have homes of their own. As the snake-charmer had compelled him to dance, so should they be obliged to wander all their lives, never resting more than a week in any one place. Poor Gipsies! No; I'm not a bit afraid of them, and I don't believe for a moment that my Billy was decoyed away by a Gipsy. Had he been found wandering the Gipsy would have brought him straight down to the bungalow; he would never have left the child alone perched up on that rock to cry his little heart out with fright. They may be thieves, but they are never cruel or unkind."

They arrived at the kiosk, where Campbell intended to remain and smoke his pipe. One of the courts was empty and the players were straggling up towards the kiosk to sit down and rest.

"Nellie!" cried Fred, as he began to pick up sides, "you must join this sett. And, Mrs. Loveden, wouldn't you like to play?"

"Please leave me out," replied Helen; "I must go and look after Billy and Betty presently. It will soon be their tea time. There's Mrs. Langley, I'm sure she would like to play."

The game was made up, and Nellie took her place on the court. As she stood waiting her turn for the ball to be served to her, she saw Fred returning to the kiosk, where he dispensed claret-cup and lemonade to the chattering company with the help of Mrs. Loveden, who appeared to have forgotten all about her children for the moment.

For the first time in her life Nellie felt a stirring within her of unusual emotion. She could not understand it; but the fact remained; she was unaccountably angry with Fred and she hated Helen. She could not have given any definite reason for her unkind thoughts.

What did it all mean? she was asking herself, as her eye followed their movements to the detriment of her play. Was there anything between them? It could not be.

For some time past she had built hopes on a vague future wherein she saw Gay captured by a lover and Fred left to a brother's fate.

Then who could tell what might happen? Fred could not live alone; he must have some one to look after him and the house. The contingency had never been discussed between them; for it seemed to belong to a dim and vague future. The time was not ripe for the contemplation of such matters. Her father could not be left at present. There were moments when Campbell spoke of a longing to return to England before he was too old to enjoy the renewal of the club life which he promised himself. During the time he spent among his chums Nellie could pay her long-promised visits to various uncles and aunts. Later he might return to Ceylon, or if not, he would find a small house with a little shooting in one of the home counties. Nell could have her fowl-yard and dairy and he his garden.

To all of this she assented, but always with a secret reservation, "If I don't marry."

Fred had seemed of late years to belong to her. Now here he was appropriated by this comparative stranger whom Gay had introduced into the house. Apparently he was quite ready to be appropriated, and therein lay the sting that was poisoning Nellie's happiness. Mrs. Loveden's thoughts ought to be confined entirely to her own fatherless children, and to the memory of her gallant husband who had given his life for his country.

Nellie slogged wildly at the balls, and Charnes, who was her partner, watched her with amazement. Never before, for the many years he had known Nellie Campbell, had she displayed so much temper over a simple game of tennis.

CHAPTER VI

JOHN SMITH found Gay alone, as he intended he should by arriving late. A chance visitor might turn up, but by half-past four it was unlikely. The men and women who came to Toona Kelli took care to reach their destination early enough to give themselves and their syces and rickshaw men time enough to rest before starting on the homeward journey.

Smith felt secure of his *tête-à-tête*. He took the chair nearest to Gay with a satisfaction he did not attempt to conceal.

"Well, Miss Goldenham, how goes the world with you?" he asked as he received a cup of freshly made tea.

"Most satisfactorily," she replied politely, but with a slight touch of indifference.

"That's all right; and you have no news to tell me. How are all the kiddies?"

"Flourishing. Have some of this sponge sandwich." She handed him a dish. "Or will you try a bit of this spiced loaf, or that cherry cake?"

He held up his hand in protest.

"Don't, don't feed me as if I were a pet animal; not that I should at all object to being a pet of any kind——" he paused as he helped himself from one of the dishes, "if I belonged to you."

Gay busied herself with the tray and rang the hand bell for the servant, to whom she gave an order for more hot water. The remark seemed lost upon her. As Smith watched her he concluded that she had not taken in the meaning of his words, and he was ever so slightly nettled.

He was right in his surmise that he had passed for the moment out of her mental vision. Her mind was still full of the events of the morning. Her ride up into the mountain

would have been just a pleasant memory, but for that far-off belated reply to her last call. It told her that her errand was unfulfilled; that the agonized cry conveyed on the slip of paper was unanswered. It also convinced her that the journey to the elephant rocks must be repeated, and that before long. With the far-off response still ringing in her ears, as it came down from some forest fastness where the poor fugitive had fled for safety, she could not salve her conscience with the thought that she had done her duty, and had given the unknown a fair chance of meeting her. It was impossible to let the matter rest there. That answering call meant only one thing—she had been too early in keeping the appointment and had missed the mysterious stranger. Yes; she must go again, and as soon as possible.

On the top of this thought came the question whether she should tell Fred of her experiences. No; he had no tact, no diplomacy whatever. The first thing he would do, if he set about unravelling the mystery, would be to summon the police and assist them with coolies in a kind of beating of the jungle, as if he were trying to track a deer or a wounded leopard. If the man were found he would straightway be delivered into the hands of the police.

Should she confide in Geoffry? Again no, most emphatically no! Good old Geoff would lift the whole affair out of her hands. He might respect the unfortunate creature's secret whatever it was; but his action would be guided in the end by a rigid sense of justice. If he found that the unknown was a criminal, he would deem it his duty not to obstruct the working of the law. Of course he would behave in the gentlest manner possible; but Geoffry was not a man to condone a crime that merited punishment. He was not troubled with any false sentiment on that score.

Moreover, Geoffry, in his care for her and with that foolish weakness in looking upon her as still a child, would most certainly find means of preventing her from having any further hand in the search. His plea would be risk to herself. A desperate man was capable of anything: of robbing her, of stealing her pony, and of leaving her stranded in the depths of the jungle, he would say. Gay's curiosity was deeply stirred, and she was full of romance. She pictured an outlaw, and she badly wanted to minister to

him herself without interference from Fred and dictation from Geoffry. She decided that she would keep the threads of the mystery in her own hands for the present.

"You are very serious, Miss Goldenham; and may I point out that the pet animal of the moment is pining for another piece of that cherry cake," said Smith, who had been watching her with an expression of amusement on his pallid fleshy face during the silence that had ensued.

"I beg your pardon!" cried Gay, with sudden compunction. "And do let me give you another cup of tea."

He placed his cup on the tray, and as he did so his hand accidentally—she could not think that it was otherwise than by accident—brushed hers with a soft touch. She felt as though a scaly snake had glided by; and for a brief moment her eyes swept over him with swift inquiry. The self-satisfied expression on his face reassured her, and she was ashamed of the inward revulsion his touch had produced.

"You haven't asked me what I have been doing lately?" he said in a smooth friendly voice, to which it was impossible to take exception.

"Do tell me," said Gay, politely, as she concentrated her thoughts on her duty as a hostess.

"I have been buying up wild animals of all sorts and sizes; snakes in particular."

She glanced at him in astonishment. "What for?" she asked.

"It's a commission from Japan to furnish a new zoological garden which is being made by the town council of a large city. The Japanese ambassador in London is so pleased with the terraces built a few years ago in Regent's Park that he has ordered something of the same sort to be made in his own town. The authorities mean to go one better than the gardens in Regent's Park. They want a terrace for snakes and reptiles of all kinds; and the snakes are to be cobras and tic-polongas and such like."

"The most poisonous that they can find," remarked Gay. "How are you going to procure them?"

"From the jungle men."

She remembered the Gipsy she had seen only that morning in the forest playing with the cobra.

"They will bring you any number."

"You mean I can buy any number from them; but I shall have to go into the jungle with my own baskets and choose for myself. I am having large strong baskets made which can be fastened with padlocks. If you see any of my coolies carrying up what look like wash baskets you will know what they are."

"Let's go down to the courts," said Gay, rising from the table. "Perhaps you would like a game."

"I am quite content—more than content to sit here," he said, as he reluctantly followed her example. His eyes rested full upon her and she moved impatiently under his gaze.

"Sorry, but I am afraid I must think of my other guests," she replied shortly.

She walked towards the verandah, and they went slowly down the steps. He detained her to make a few remarks about the garden, to praise and ask questions that were of no consequence as to how she managed to rear her beautiful flowers. She moved on at a steady pace, and he was obliged to follow unless he wished to be left behind.

"You are unkind! you won't listen to me whether I talk about flowers——"

"—or snakes!" she added with a laugh that sent the blood to his forehead. He felt that she was ridiculing his efforts and making fun of his sentimental mood. There was silence between them which Gay did not care to break. The courts were visible below. One of them was unoccupied, the game being over. Gay quickened her pace.

"You will be in time for the next sett if we hurry," she said.

"I never hurry; I accomplish all things that I have really at heart in my own time; and I never allow myself to be irritated. It is waste of energy."

"Oh! indeed! then what about the war?"

Smith's face darkened. Gay had thrust at him knowingly. He was a pessimist; and the great European war was the one subject on which John Smith, rabid Britisher that he was in speech, could not talk temperately. He was never tired of denouncing "the enemy." In the hearing of men his anathemas were unguarded and emphatic. In Gay's presence he was obliged to control his language. He did not

reply immediately. When he had recovered his self-possession sufficiently to speak with his usual calm he asked—

“Have you seen the paper to-day?”

“No, to tell you the truth I have not had a moment even to glance at the headlines. The paper arrived only an hour ago. We get our post late as we are such a long way from the post office.”

“The British have made an advance on the west Front; but it is only a flash in the pan. Why don’t they sweep on and carry all before them? They can’t. That’s the brutal truth; only we Britishers won’t allow it. You don’t seem interested, Miss Goldenham.”

He shot a glance at her as though he would read her mind.

“If you think so, why don’t you go and help them?” she asked quickly. Then, as he made no reply, she continued. “I am interested of course; but not in detail. I feel perfectly convinced that we shall win in the end. Why should I worry over the how and the when and the where? I am content to be patient.”

“I wish I could feel as hopeful and confident as you that the enemy will be beaten. Can’t you teach me how to cultivate the sweet patience and faith that you have?”

“No, I can’t!” she replied abruptly. His lapses into the personal note irritated her. “I am not sure that I want to do anything for you just now, but get you into a game of tennis.”

“Thanks, but I am not going to play tennis,” he replied.

They had only a short distance to walk to the kiosk. Several people were idly-watching them.

“I say!” said one of the players on the further court, “do look at Smith talking to Miss Goldenham! I’ll bet from his face and hers that he has got on to the subject of the war, and she doesn’t like his strong language.”

“He’s rabid on it. Smith is no favourite of mine and I like him least when he is expressing his opinions about it.”

At that precise moment, however, John Smith did not happen to be talking about the war. He had suddenly started on another subject.

“You were out early this morning, Miss Goldenham,” he said abruptly.

"I was," she replied, her level brows slightly raised.

"Do you often ride up into the forest at sunrise?"

"When the fancy takes me," she said indifferently.

"How did you know I was out this morning?"

"I saw you near the waterhole. I was above you on the path."

Gay knew that he meant the track Geoffry had taken the day before, while she went to the elephant rocks in search of Billy. Smith must have heard her call when she stopped on her way back at the waterhole. A sudden suspicion entered her mind; could it be possible that he had answered her? She was not going to be betrayed into asking any questions. They might lead to questions on the other side.

"Wasn't it a glorious morning?" she said; then without waiting for a reply she turned into the kiosk where Fred, with Helen's assistance, was still busy dispensing cooling drinks to the hot and thirsty players as they finished their games.

Nurse Catherine, her uniform laid aside for a white tennis dress, was chatting with the doctor of the district. He was an active man whose practice extended to a radius of forty or fifty miles. They were talking "shop" and discussing Mesopotamian affairs.

"I was nearly going there myself," he was saying. "If my job here had been one that an old man could have taken I would have gone. The planters sent me a round robin appeal which was so cunningly worded I had to stay. They pleaded on behalf of their wives and children, and I could not say no. But, I should like to have gone."

"You would have seen some sad sights," she said. "It was a cruel waste of England's best blood. Even if men were not killed outright, they were broken to bits by what they went through, body and soul."

He looked into her troubled eyes and knew something of the glimpse into the nether regions which she had had.

"You were at the base of course," he remarked.

"I didn't see the actual killing, you mean. What I saw were the broken bits that survived. Then there was the climate; and the shortage of food and good water. No wonder so many of those poor boys—some of them not yet

in their twenties—went to pieces. There was one with a wounded foot, a second Lieutenant—he could not have been more than nineteen—who used to hold out his poor thin arms to me from his bed, his eyes streaming. Like a terrified baby, he would cry, ‘Nurse, nurse, take me, nurse! Hold me tight, nurse; the devils are coming to kill me!’”

“You gave him a sedative, I suppose.”

“The best sedative was to take him in my arms then and there, hold him tight and let him cling to me till the paroxysm of terror had passed. I hope I may be forgiven, but I kissed and comforted and soothed that boy as if he were a baby.”

“Which he was for the time being with those broken nerves. What had upset him? Shell-burst?”

“No; after a raid he was hit and unable to crawl back to the trenches. As he lay there he saw the Arabs come out to kill our wounded. The Turks drove them off; otherwise he must have lost his life.”

The eyes that looked into Dr. Caversham’s were moist with tears, but the tears did not fall. The tragedy, the cruelty were too great for feeble weeping.

“Poor Nurse Catherine!” he said softly. “If our men are heroes, our women are heroines. Did the boy die?”

“No; he was young, and his foot mended; his nerves strengthened, and recovered from the shock. He was shipped off to India on sick leave. He came to say good-bye. As he shook my hand he murmured the usual thanks. Then, as a kind of afterthought, he added, ‘I hope we shall meet again, Nurse Catherine. Somehow you remind me of my mother.’ I wondered if he remembered the mothering he had had from me in his worst dreams.”

“I think not. Mercifully the brain in many cases obliterates the active memory and allows the visions to die into oblivion. Men could not keep their sanity if they were confronted continually with the recollection of all the horrors that have passed before their eyes in this war. You are not going back, are you?”

“Not yet; but things are very different now in Mesopotamia.”

“Still war is war, and there must be fighting, with wounding and killing. You ought not to go back until your nerve

is restored ; otherwise we shall have you wanting the same treatment as that poor boy."

She laughed as she answered back. "If I do want comforting I hope there will be a motherly nurse around somewhere."

"Or a fatherly doctor ? What ?"

"Now you're making fun of me. I must go and ask for a glass of lemonade. Miss Goldenham has come down to the kiosk, I see."

"And brought that fellow Smith with her. He looks as if she had not given him a very good time on the whole."

Geoffry's game had been over some minutes when Gay joined her guests. He had watched her as she walked down the path. Standing where he was, he could not help overhearing Smith's remark that he had seen Gay by the waterhole this morning ; and he wondered, considering that Billy was safe, what took her so far into the forest at that time.

He waited till the party broke up. The children stopped their play, and were shepherded up to the bungalow to tea by a couple of ayahs and a man-servant. Fred was talking to Campbell ; there was a general buzz of conversation. People collected their wraps and racquets, called for their horses and rickshaws, and with a nod and a shake of the hand departed as the setting sun sank towards the hill-tops. Presently Gay found Geoff at her side.

"Let's walk up to the bungalow, the air is getting cool," he said. "I overheard Smith say that he saw you near the waterhole this morning," he continued as they moved out of hearing of the people still remaining in the kiosk.

"I could not sleep ; so I dressed and ordered the pony to be saddled. It was a lovely morning, and you know how I enjoy the forest at all hours of the day."

"How far did you go ?" he asked, unconsciously assuming a tone that he might have used to Billy.

"To the elephant rocks, and about half a mile further."

"Did you see any one ?"

"I met a Gipsy, a strange-looking man with long hair and wild beard—as forest bred as the jungle creatures themselves. He was playing with a cobra that rested on his arm as if it were a pet."

"Could he have been Billy's geegee?" asked Charnes; but even as he spoke the words he rejected the suggestion as unlikely.

"I don't think so," said Gay. "Would a Gipsy have any knowledge of the English language?"

"He might know a few words. They are very quick at picking up a language. Many of them can speak Telugu, the language of their immediate ancestors, and Tamil which they get from the Indian coolies on the estates, and Sinhali from the village people in the hills as well as in the low country where they wander sometimes."

"Anyway he wouldn't be able to read or write a language, would he?" she persisted.

"Rather not! Probably you were the first English woman he had ever spoken to. By-the-bye, did you speak to him?"

They turned into a rose walk where ramblers sprawled over a long pergola.

"Yes, in Tamil, and he said that I might ride all over the forest in safety. I was favoured of the gods, whatever that might mean."

"Flattery; he was hoping that you would give him a few cents. You didn't, did you?"

"I never thought of it."

"Well, don't encourage him if you see him again; but, Gay——"

"Geoff?" she answered back, her grey eyes seeking his with an unspoken question in them. Should she tell him? The impulse to confide was strong upon her. She had always been accustomed to take all her difficulties to him and allow him to decide and dictate. When they concerned herself alone it was all right, but now when it concerned another——?

"Gay, I wish you wouldn't take these long rides into the forest alone. Why shouldn't the syce go with you?"

The impulse died out as suddenly as it had arisen, and the desire to confide in him passed. His words were not what she had expected. They implied restraint and limitations she was not inclined to brook. Her first thoughts were best. It would be a mistake to entrust another man's secret with any human being until she had permission.

"I assure you I am perfectly safe," she replied; and as he listened he knew he had struck a wrong note. Gay might be coaxed or led, but never driven. "I shall not elope with a handsome young Gipsy nor be found perched upon a rock like Billy. If I am, you can come and rescue me," she concluded in the old childish way that marked their early friendship.

"I wasn't thinking of Gipsies," he said moodily.

"What were you thinking about?" she asked, puzzled at his seriousness.

They had stopped at the end of the pergola, and were standing in its shade. The garden was flooded with the gold of the sunset, and the colour of the flowers shone vividly. The bungalow was hidden from view by the orange trees. Gay slipped her hand into his as she was wont to do when she was a child.

"Geoff, dear old Geoff; don't take to fussing about me! I am safe, as the snake-charmer said."

She felt his fingers close over her hand, and she was drawn closer. Suddenly he bent forward and kissed her.

She drew back, laughing, in no way confused. In the old days he had kissed her many times, but of late the custom had dropped out.

"Really! Geoff!" she protested. "You make me feel as if I were a child again. Will you never realize that I am grown up and out of my flapperhood?"

His manner changed instantly. Far from thinking of the child of old days, his mind was full of the beautiful woman by his side. Her words came as a dash of cold water. They reminded him with something of a shock of the gap of years between them.

"My dear little girl!" he began, lapsing into an ancient term of endearment as he tried without much success to resume the rôle of the old friend. He got no further; she broke in upon the laboured apology that was coming.

"Geoff, I am no longer a little girl. I am old enough to take care of myself. I am sure the jungle men will do me no harm, and I shall be quite safe in the forest."

"I wasn't thinking of the Gipsies," he repeated.

Gay glanced at him in inquiry. If the Gipsies were not in his mind whom did he fear? Did he suspect the existence

of the Burgher boy or some European fugitive hiding from the police? He had more than once stated his conviction that Billy's mysterious geegee was a Sinhalese woodcutter. At that moment the children's tea-bell rang.

"Come and help me with the children's tea in the dining-room, and don't worry your dear old head about me and my excursions into the forest. My morning or afternoon ride is the only opportunity I have of getting away for an hour or two from my many self-imposed duties. Look! here come some of the little darlings to call me in."

Five sturdy boys and girls came running towards her. They were led by Billy; and they were laughing among themselves as if they had discovered a new and wonderful game. As they ran they all tried to keep one eye closed.

"See here, Gay!" cried a little girl, closing her right eye. "This is how the knight in the forest looks."

Gay led the way to a side verandah into which the dining-room opened. The closing of one eye made the climb up the steps difficult for the little people.

"Take care!" cried Geoffry, as he picked up the smallest child who had fallen. "Why are you shutting your eyes?"

"Billy says the geegee knight in the forest shut one eye like this," was the reply from more than one child.

"What nonsense Billy talks!" said Gay.

"It isn't nonsense!" shouted Billy, indignantly. "My geegee used only one eye at a time. I asked him why he didn't use two like me, and he said the other eye was sleeping. It had gone to biddy-bo inside his head."

"Was your geegee dressed like a Sinhali?" asked Geoffry.

"Yes; but he had no comb in his hair."

"Was he black or brown or white?"

"He was a little black and a little white and a little brown," answered Billy promptly.

"I told you his story was becoming much embroidered," said Gay to Charnes as they entered the dining-room and the children took their seats.

Nurse Catherine was already there with the ayahs; the imaginary one-eyed knight was forgotten in the business of the meal. Ten minutes later when Gay was still busy pouring out weak tea and milk, and Geoffry was encouraging

Billy to take a third piece of cake, Smith's voice was heard in the verandah asking for Miss Goldenham.

"Oh, Geoff!" cried Gay. "I don't want him here. Go and tell him I am busy with the children, and say good-bye for me. I thought I had done it at the kiosk, but I suppose he didn't hear me."

Charnes hesitated; he was not sure that Smith would be satisfied with a message of the kind. Gay noticed his hesitation and said—

"Go, Geoff, and help Fred and Helen to speed the parting guest. I should not grieve if I never saw Mr. Smith again."

Charnes disappeared with alacrity, a smile on his lips and a twinkle of amusement in his eye.

A little later Geoffry himself had to say farewell. His bungalow was less than a mile distant. The smile was still on his lips. Gay had readily promised that she would ride into the forest with him in two or three days' time. He was to get his work on the estate done early, and come to breakfast; and they would leave not later than one o'clock so as to be able to return by sunset.

"I want to go five or six miles beyond the elephant rocks," said Gay.

"Wouldn't you like to take the other path leading past the timber reserve where the woodcutters are at work? It would be a change."

"Another time, perhaps; but for Tuesday next it is to be the elephant rocks and beyond," she said decisively.

Charnes did not mind where he went as long as he was with her, and he boldly said so.

"Very well; and bring your horse. We shall cover the ground more quickly than if you're on foot," she replied.

CHAPTER VII

THE southern part of Ceylon is not unlike the south-western district of India. The mountains fall away abruptly towards the sea, and are lost in undulations that merge into level tracts of rich soil extending to the very verge of the sandy shores.

By means of irrigation the Sinhalese cultivate portions of the ground and produce rice and palms ; but in so doing they have to wage an incessant war against nature. To relax is to yield the land to a rank growth of weed, creeper, and dense shrub. With the cheyna, as the growth is called, comes the rooting wild pig, the voracious rat and the poisonous snake. The whole life of the low-country Sinhali is one monotonous round of work as he plods industriously and with wonderful patience, fighting nature for the possession of his land, and snatching his crops from the predatory animal.

The up-country Sinhali builds his house and manages his affairs with a higher intelligence than the inhabitant of the low country. He has more than his share of self-reliance, pride, and independence.

The large landowner who still lives on his estate—the nobleman of Ceylon known as the Ratamahatmeya—is in these days too well educated to cherish any such dreams. He is aware that he is well governed, and that he lives with property and life secure under British rule ; he is content to remain so.

The up-country villager with his few acres of profitable cultivation—coffee, cocoa, tea, areca-nuts, cardamoms and sugar-cane—is not as wise in his generation as the Sinhali nobleman.

Asseri, the headman of a village some ten miles from the Toona Kelli estate, was one of the most truculent of the

hillmen. The country between the village and the estate was covered with forest through which paths that were little better than game tracks ran. The village lay at the head of a warm valley on the other side of the ridge; and the products were carried some seven or eight miles down the mountain-side to the cart road that wound its way through the foothills. The Gipsies were always ready to serve as porters, and the produce consigned to their care was faithfully delivered without fail.

When their services were required the tribe encamped near the village higher up on the edge of the forest at a prescribed distance outside the hedge that formed the boundary. None of the villagers approved of their presence; but on account of their services they were tolerated. As soon as the portage was completed the villagers showed an ungrateful desire to hasten the departure of the wandering tribe.

At this time the Gipsies were encamped within a mile of Asseri's village in an open glade of the forest on the ridge above. The palm-leaf shelters shaped like the hood of a cart were built in a row, one behind the other. Their entrances were screened by a palm-leaf or a discoloured rag suspended as a curtain. The last hut nearest to the edge of the undergrowth of the forest was larger than the rest.

At a little distance some donkeys were tethered, and two or three yellow dogs slept in patches of sunlight. A number of round flat baskets were lying about near the large hut. They were intended for captured snakes. Some of them were already occupied.

At the other end of the encampment a fire was burning. Gipsy women and girls in bright-coloured garments were busy preparing the midday meal. One of them, a girl of sixteen named Maridi, stirred a large cooking-pot. The bangles on her arms tinkled and clinked with every movement of the hand. Barbaric necklaces of coloured beads and shells hung in coils round her neck, and her fingers and thumbs were covered with rings cut out of the chank shell. Some of the women made the leaf platters required for the midday meal. They fastened leaf to leaf with pins of grass stalks.

The children, shock-headed and clothed in picturesque rags, had gathered round the fire. They were listening to

the old grandmother, Hathay by name, who was seated near the cooking-pots that she might keep her eye on the preparation of the meal. To stop the clamour of the hungry children she related a story in a high-pitched voice. She spoke in the soft Telugu tongue of the Peninsula, the language of the country from which the tribe had come. With many "ums" and "ers" she told her tale, interrupting it frequently to give Maridi directions concerning the hotpot in preparation. The children had heard it all before, but their interest was none the less diminished by that fact.

"And there had been much dew but no rain. At evening when the sun shut his burning eye and fell asleep behind the big rock where lies his bed, the sky burned redder than the jungle fire. The winged flies flew high, for they had no fear of storm and rain; and the leaves of the trees curled and dropped to the ground," she droned.

"And the green and grey and brown grubs buried themselves in the earth," added one of the children.

"Be silent; it is for me to tell the tale of the good snake." (The cobra is known to natives throughout India and Ceylon as the good snake.) "The good snake came out of its hole in the rocks to seek for food. Deep in the jungle where once the water had stood it found a frog."

"The frog was asleep because it knew no rain was coming yet," said Maridi, pausing in the stirring of the cooking-pot to listen to a story that never lost its fascination for the snake-charmer's tribe.

"Dah, daughter!" cried Hathay, who brooked no interference. "The fire is dying. Feed it with a stick or two; and as the pot bubbles stir it well. After the good snake had eaten the frog it went to the pool in the forest to drink; but by reason of the sun's fierce heat and the casting down of the leaves from the trees, the water had sunk under the ground and had disappeared. It is known that the snake has feet, but they are hidden under its scales, and it cannot scratch and dig like the wild pig where it smells the water."

"The snakes in the baskets have no feet," said one of the boys.

"Their feet cannot be seen, but they are there; and the snakes know how to use them when they dance to the pipes or run away to hide from the snake eagle."

The old woman stopped and listened like a wild animal, turning her head to catch the various sounds coming from different directions—the birds and monkeys of the forest, the dogs barking in the distant village and the Sinhalese calling to each other as they gathered the red berries from the straggling unpruned coffee bushes. The children followed her example closely like a colony of young bandicoots mindful of the wild cat. Satisfied that no stranger nor wild animal approached to disturb them, she continued.

“The good snake crept on and on, and each waterhole it came to was empty and each mountain stream was dry. At last it reached the place where the Gipsies dwelt. Now the Gipsies are very clever at discovering water; they cannot cook without it. They had found water and had uncovered it removing the mud under which the water had hidden itself. While the men hunted and the women cooked, a child was left to guard the precious waterhole and drive away the birds and rats and wild things of the forest that might spoil the water. The men gave him a long bamboo——”

“To beat off the birds and beasts!” cried two of the boys together, as the old woman suddenly broke off. Her attention was diverted to the cooking-pot containing the stew. She took the wooden ladle from the girl, swept her finger over it and tasted it.

“More pepper—so—now the green chillies; and when they are soft it will be ready.”

“Did the good snake go to the pool to drink?” asked a little girl, when the ladle had been returned to the pot.

“It went, first asking leave of the big mistress who guided the young women at the fires. Then the good snake ran and came quickly to the waterhole. The smell of the water was like the smell of the coming rain as it travels over the jungle, a smell that strengthens the heart after a long drought and makes the wild beasts glad. In its haste the good snake began to drink without telling the keeper of the pool that it had had leave from the big mistress. The boy was angry and struck at the good snake with his cane. Then the good snake lifted its head and said: “Do not break my neck with your stick. The big mistress sitting by the fire gave leave for me to drink.” The boy replied: ‘Good! if

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she who rules us gave leave then drink your fill, and I will guard you from the snake eagle while you drink.' So the good snake drank and departed. On its way back to its home in the rocks it met a tic-polonga" (Russell viper).

"Ah, bah!" exclaimed the children in chorus.

"It is the most evil of all snakes!" cried Maridi.

"Nay, daughter; there is one more evil, the mopila."

The girl shuddered, and the children covered their mouths with their hands, drawing closer to the old woman.

"Tell us about the mopila," said one of the children.

"I will finish first about the good snake, and its life-long enemy the tic-polonga, and why they always fight when they meet. The tic-polonga asked the good snake where it could find water, for it could see the drops upon the mouth of the other and knew that it had just drunk. The good snake told of the waterhole guarded by the Gipsy boy. 'First ask the big mistress to give leave to drink: then tell the boy, and he will allow you to come close to the water. He will also guard you from the snake eagle while you drink. On no account do the boy harm. Are not the Gipsies our friends? They play their music for us and charm our ears so deeply that while we listen we are blind. Promise that you will not hurt the boy.' The tic-polonga promised; but the good snake knew that it was evil-minded like all its race. The tic-polonga ran with all haste to the pool, never stopping to beg for leave from the big mistress. The boy struck at it with his cane. The ill-tempered snake forgot its promise, and bit the child."

"Did he die?" asked a little girl.

"There was no one there to put the snake-stone on the bite and draw out the poison, and the child died as the sun went down."

"And the wicked tic-polonga?"

"As the good snake was not sure if the tic-polonga would keep its promise it followed to watch. It saw the tic-polonga bite the boy, and it ran and caught the wicked snake by the neck. They fought and fought with writhing and knotted bodies until the tic-polonga died. Ever since then the good snake fights the tic-polonga whenever they meet because it cannot forgive the killing of the snake-charmer's child."

"Now tell us of the mopila," begged the biggest girl.

"The green chillies are soft," said Maridi.

"Then call the men. It is time they returned; they cannot be far away."

The boys scampered off to the stream where the men were washing after their morning's hunt, the dogs impatiently waiting at the edge of the water for their masters. Dakshi the snake-charmer, whom Gay had met at the elephant rocks, was with them. They had brought home a mouse-deer, two jungle fowl and a headless bird with its feathers mostly plucked. It looked suspiciously like a rooster from some distant cooly lines. These would serve for the morrow's meal.

The men seated themselves at a little distance from the cooking fire. Under the direction of Hathay, Maridi, with the assistance of other women, who emerged from their huts at the sound of the men's voices, gave each man a large leaf which he hollowed in the palm of one hand. Into this a portion of the stew was ladled out. The dogs crouched quietly behind their masters to wait for the bones and scraps that would be thrown to them during the course of the meal. Each dog knew his own master, and would not touch anything but what was given by his master's hand. By some curious canine law individual rights were respected, and there was no fighting over food, however hungry the animals might be.

Dakshi was helped first, and to him was given a second portion on another leaf. He put it carefully aside while he ate his own.

The women supplied the men with the stew; and with boiled millet that was pressed together and made up into dumplings. When they were satisfied the children were fed; and finally the women finished the contents of the pot, sitting apart by themselves and eating in silence.

Dakshi rose and took up a jar of water; he poured a libation to the mysterious spirit of the forest venerated and occasionally worshipped by the tribe. He drank without touching the vessel with his lips and passed it to the other men, who in turn quenched their thirst. Then lifting the leaf platter which held the breast of a fowl he walked towards the larger hut at the further end of the row.

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"See, the big father goes to feed the snakes," whispered one of the girls.

"Get the saucer of milk, daughter. The good snake will want to drink after eating," said Hathay to Maridi.

The girl carried a pan of donkey's milk to the hut. She could hear the old snake-charmer speaking to the large cobra that lived in the biggest basket inside the hut.

"Eat, my son; eat and drink. Afterwards sleep in thy blanket and take rest."

The sound of his panpipes came softly from his hut as Maridi retraced her steps to the camp fire, now little more than a heap of ashes. Presently Dakshi pushed aside the curtain of the hut and came out. He laid himself across the entrance pillowing his head upon a block of wood and fell asleep. A beautiful cobra followed him, gliding over his recumbent body without fear or haste. Two of the flat baskets bulged here and there as their occupants stirred within. The lids were loose, and the snakes pushed them aside, moving noiselessly with a curious absence of any apparent effort, as if volition depended on free will rather than muscular exertion.

The sun, past its midday hour, blazed down upon the encampment in large splashes of golden light and warmth. The morning breeze died away and the twittering birds of the morning were silent. Wild nature basked drowsily in the heat; even the trees of the forest seemed to sleep.

The men, tired with their morning hunt, closed their eyes immediately, and the women and children followed their example. Nothing moved but the snakes, and they only sought the driest and warmest spot where they might sun themselves. Their flat heads rested on the ground, and the long sinuous bodies lay in graceful curves. Black eyes glittered and shining scales gleamed with prismatic tints, a sign of healthy vitality only to be seen in the living snake.

The dogs ignored the reptiles, keeping their distance as though they were not as sure of the good snake's friendship as the Gipsies were. When the bones left from the feast were crunched and eaten to the last fragment and the leaf platters—never used a second time—had been licked clean, the dogs curled themselves round in some sunny spot and slept like their masters.

It was a strange scene, man, animal, and reptile living in an odd association that was not inimical. They could scarcely be called friends ; yet they were more or less dependent on each other, inasmuch as their lives were not complete without the association. They were like the wild animals of the forest, those that did not prey on each other. Man, primitive as he was in the person of the Gipsy, was the master. He dominated the dog and the donkey, and compelled them to work for him. He controlled the reptile by the sound of his pipes, and attached it to him so that it allowed itself to be handled without danger. He tamed it as he tamed the dog, till all desire to escape was gone. It would be hard to say if there was any love between the snake-charmer and his strange pets. Did the cobra, as it drew its length with lingering movement over the body of the old man lying before the entrance of his habitation, feel any affection for the hand that fed it with milk ? An oriental proverb says : " Give the snake milk, you only get poison." This was not so with the good snake. Had it been robbed of its poison bags and fangs ? If not, then to Dakshi and his fellow-men must have been known some secrets of snake-charming that were unknown to the outside world. Dakshi may possibly have felt something like affection for the large cobra that was so often his companion ; but it was hard to believe that the snake had anything like the same feeling for the master of the pipes. Yet the cobra recognized him, and came at his call, even when it had glided into the rank jungle, and might have escaped had it wished to do so.

The children, boys and girls, were equally fearless of the good snake. They handled it with impunity. A child of three might pick up a tamed cobra by the neck and drag it along after him for a few toddling uncertain steps, and then drop it. The snake submitted, and when released would slowly wriggle away, bored perhaps, but not angered.

And now that curious little bit of the tropical wild was asleep ; at peace with itself and its associates, without fear or suspicion of danger or treachery within its confines.

CHAPTER VIII

INTO this kingdom of sunny repose stepped Asseri, the Sinhali. He was a fine, well-built man, with an instinctive aristocratic bearing. He wore a short tweed coat cut by a good Colombo tailor; a shirt, collar, and coloured tie that would not have disgraced a European. Below the waist his dress was thoroughly oriental. A coloured cloth of a brown and blue pattern printed on buff was bound tightly round his waist and secured by a flexible silver belt of beautiful workmanship. The cloth hung below his knees and reached the silk socks and stout boots of brown leather that encased his feet.

His features were regular, his forehead rounded and narrow. The mouth was small; a carefully tended moustache did not hide the full lips and their contemptuous lines. His long black hair was brushed back and knotted. A tortoiseshell comb arched the crown of his head, its extremities passing down to his ears.

The manner of wearing the comb marks the difference between the upcountry man and his despised compatriot of the low country, whose comb rests on his brow like a chaplet.

Asseri was not alone, by his side was John Smith.

The dogs growled, and one of them rose and stretched itself. It sniffed the air, gave a single "woof!" and recognizing the two men as occasional visitors to the camp, settled down to sleep again. The other dogs understood by the single bark that all was well; they dropped their heads upon their paws and closed their eyes. The snakes did not move.

Smith put his hand on Asseri's arm to hold him back.

"Look at the snakes, man! They've escaped from their baskets!"

Dakshi slept as lightly as one of his own dogs. At the warning note he awoke. He rose without haste, alert and observant, and stood by the large hut waiting for what should come next, as the leopard waits and watches when it is not prowling in search of food.

"Hi, Dakshi! have you caught any snakes for this gentleman? He gave order for six polongas, six cobras, and six mopilas; where are they?" asked Asseri.

The Gipsy pointed to some baskets with the lids tied down.

"How many?" demanded Asseri. His manner was distinctly overbearing.

"Tic-polongas four; very bad snakes," replied the old man.

"Have you drawn their fangs?"

"The fangs of snakes grow again," was the reply, intimating that he would take no responsibility.

"And cobras; how many have you?"

"Two only, and they are young."

John Smith's eyes rested on the cobra lying at the snake-charmer's feet.

"Not for sale," said Dakshi, answering the questioning glance of the planter.

"Nor those?" asked Smith, pointing to the other two.

By this time the camp was roused, and the spell of the after-dinner slumber dispersed. The old man made a sign to one of the children, a long-limbed boy, spare in figure, who only needed a skin clothed with fur to make him a dog or a monkey. He moved noiselessly to the spot where, in the full blaze of the warm rays, the cobras sunned themselves. He clasped each by the neck with fearless unhurried touch, and dragged them unresisting over the soft grass to their baskets. Thrusting a head in each basket he waited while they slowly withdrew their length until only the tip of the tail hung over the edge. The boy swept the tails one after the other inside and replaced the lids. He lifted the baskets and slipped them into the hut behind the curtain. In this action Smith was left to find the reply to his last question.

The large cobra still rested motionless at the old man's feet, its glittering eyes upon Smith and his companion.

Now and then its tongue shot forth with a quick quivering motion.

"Have you any mopila snakes?" asked Smith.

"None at present, excellency. Your honour knows that they must be sought in the warm jungle. They are difficult to take, as they live in the trees."

"Will the sound of the pipes draw them down?"

"There is a better way," said Dakshi.

Asseri laughed unpleasantly. "I will tell you, sir, how the mopila may be caught. A child is kidnapped from some Sinhali village. It is given a sweetmeat that sends it to sleep. Then it is placed in the jungle beneath the tree where the mopila lives. The snake coils its tail round the limb of a tree. A second snake links itself to the first. A third and a fourth extends the chain until the sleeping child is reached. Gently and soothingly the snake licks its throat till the blood is drawn. Then like the leech of the swamp it drinks its fill. Each in turn drinks and becomes heavy with its feast, so heavy that the mopila is easily taken."

"How horrible!" cried Smith, looking at the snake-charmer standing there with his reptile pet glittering in the sun at his feet. His voice and eyes betrayed his aversion.

Asseri spoke in English, a language he had learned at the college in Colombo where he was educated. Dakshi did not understand what was being said, but with quick intuition he divined that it was some statement derogatory to himself. He shifted uneasily, and the snake hissed softly.

"Is it true that you catch the mopila with a child as a bait?" asked Smith, in the man's language.

The Gipsy's eyes flashed angrily as he let them rest on the headman who had slandered him and his tribe.

"The bait is a young jungle pig, not a child; but we do not take the mopila. It is not to be tamed like the good snake," he answered, raising his voice to a higher pitch.

Asseri again laughed unpleasantly; this time he was amused at the anger he had raised.

"Then you believe the story?" asked Smith in English.

"I have seen a dead man who was killed by mopilas. He was a honey-hunter, and he must have fallen from a tree where he was gathering honey. Perhaps he sprained

his ankle. I was called to the place where he lay. He had turned a bluish colour showing how he had died; and on his neck was the wound where the snakes had sucked his blood."

"A jungle story; a superstitious belief of jungle men! I don't believe it," cried Smith, who hated reptiles, the snake most of all.

"You know Tamil, sir," said Asseri. "Listen while I question that old jungle man standing there." He turned to Dakshi, "Tell his honour the story of the honey-hunter. Was he not bitten in his sleep by the mopilas?"

The snake-charmer did not reply. Smith ventured a step or two nearer to the old man, keeping a wary eye on the cobra.

"It is harmless, excellency," the Gipsy reassured him. "The good snake has been with us a long time; it is one of my oldest children, and it will not bite."

"Are its poison fangs drawn?"

"Many years ago, but it will not bite now because it knows me as its father."

"It doesn't know me!" responded Smith, quickly.

Dakshi's silence was an assent to the statement.

"The honey-hunter, you know he was killed by the mopilas?" said Asseri, whose manner had all the contempt in it as well as the dislike felt by the headman for a class of humanity that was lower than himself. "Tell his honour about it," he commanded.

"He was lying under the tree where he had slept the night. Round his ankle he had bound a piece of his cloth. His body had no blood left in it."

"Leeches!" exclaimed Smith, who was strangely fascinated by the tale even though it repelled him.

"Not leeches, your honour. The leeches leave marks of their bites all over the body. There were no marks on this man except the blue mark on the neck. The mopilas killed him."

"Bah, a creepy tale!" Smith remarked to Asseri. Then, speaking to the snake-charmer again, he said, "Now about the business that we have in hand. These snakes which have been caught for me are to be delivered to his honour, the headman. He will place them in larger baskets

and return you your own. I will give you ten rupees for the six."

Dakshi's eyes blinked, the only sign of his dissent. He had been promised two rupees for each snake, not a large sum considering the dexterity required in their capture.

"Ten rupees is sufficient," said Asseri, as he detected acquiescence on the part of Smith. "You ought to thank his honour for being so liberal."

"Two rupees for each snake was promised," persisted the Gipsy.

"And out of the ten rupees," continued Asseri. "You will give me three rupees for the rent of this ground."

The forest was Government land, and no rent was chargeable to the wandering tribes that inhabited it. Smith laughed at the impudence of the Sinhali. He pulled out twelve rupees from his pocket and showed them to Dakshi.

"Here's your money, old man," he said good-naturedly.

Asseri put out his hand. "Give me three rupees, sir; it will save much trouble," he said hastily.

"You must get your money as best you can—I shall not give it to you. I don't believe that you have any right to it."

"I am headman of the village——"

"But not of the forest, my friend! You ought to be well satisfied with your harvest without robbing these poor people. Hi, Dakshi, listen! You will get me more snakes at the same price."

Smith drew nearer to the snake-charmer and dropped the rupees into his hand. They fell with a chink that made Asseri's eyes glitter. He advanced a step or two.

"Pay me three rupees or clear out of this!" he cried roughly.

"I am a poor man! These few rupees must go to the chetty who supplies us with raggi (millet)," replied Dakshi, tying the money into a corner of the scanty cloth that covered his legs. "Moreover, it is my right by custom to stay seven days in any camp."

"That's right, old man!" cried Smith, who was amused. "Don't give him a single cent. He can't turn you out of the forest."

Asseri's face took on an evil expression. "We will soon see to that. There are fifty men in the village at this very

moment, all armed with rice-pounders and clubs. They will soon sweep this scum out of the forest for me."

"Fifty men!" repeated Smith. "Are they Sinhalese and Buddhists?"

"Every one of them."

"What are they in your village for?"

"They are members of the Society, the Buddhist Society, and they have come to hear an address that I shall give them."

"I hope it will be a useful lecture!" and Smith's laugh rang out as though he were much amused. Asseri stared at him a few seconds in surprise. He had the oriental's distrust of laughter. Then his manner changed to one of studied politeness, and he said smoothly—

"Your honour knows——"

"I know nothing, nothing!" Smith said sharply. "I am not a member of your Buddhist Society."

Again the eyes of the Sinhali rested on the planter with a curious puzzled expression.

"As your honour pleases. With your kind permission I will take my leave." He turned on the Gipsy with a sudden change of manner. "As for you, you wild pig of the jungle! you will pay me three rupees or go!"

The snake-charmer stooped and put his hand to the ground. The cobra glided up his arm, half encircling his neck and passing down the left arm rested its head in his hand. Its eyes were fixed on the Sinhali, who broke off in his hectoring. Dakshi approached a step nearer and addressed him.

"Master must please excuse the three rupees. We are poor men——"

"Ah, hah! that is true!" chorused the men and women who had been looking on silent but observant as the dogs.

"Hold that cobra tight!" cried Asseri, moving backwards as if in fear.

The snake-charmer said nothing, but his eyes were fixed with curious intensity on the Sinhali. Smith looked from the snake to the Gipsy and back again at the headman. He had detected no movement on the part of the reptile.

"Can't you keep it from darting its head forward. It is

ready to strike. Stand back!" cried Asseri, with increasing alarm. He turned abruptly on his heel, and departed with a curse, repeating his threat that he would sweep the pig tribe and its snakes into the next province.

Smith looked at the cobra again. It was resting as before with its head on the snake-charmer's palm.

"It will not hurt your honour," said Dakshi, reassuringly.

"I am not so sure of that!" replied Smith. He seemed inclined to follow the Sinhali. On second thoughts he waited till the headman was out of sight.

"Answer me this, old man. While you have been hunting for snakes have you seen a European hiding in the jungle?" he demanded abruptly, in a tone of command.

"There is no European hiding in the forest, sir. How could any one live in the jungle without shelter and food? Your honour knows that he would be killed by the mopila snakes; or bitten by leeches and ticks; or attacked by wild bees and hornets."

Smith regarded him closely, searching for those almost imperceptible signs that betray the dark-skinned perverter of the truth.

"He might build himself a hut of branches such as hunters use; and there are caves. Have you seen any strange European lately?" he asked again.

"No, sir."

The snake hissed and lifted its head. Smith's attention was at once diverted; he was not sure how much control the snake-charmer exercised over the reptile. A desire to leave the place seized him.

"If you meet any stranger in the jungle you will let me know."

The cobra was becoming restless. It seemed to be endeavouring to reach the ground.

"Keep that brute still!" cried Smith, angrily, as he stepped back a pace.

The snake glided over the figure of the old man and lay in curves at his feet. The snake-charmer put his pipes to his lips and played softly. The cobra lifted itself, spread its hood, and swayed gently to and fro. Its black eyes glittering in the sun rested on Smith, and its forked tongue shot forth with a quick fluttering movement as if animated with

a separate life of its own. The purchaser of reptiles had had enough.

"The devil!" he exclaimed. "I shall have snakes on the brain if this sort of thing goes on!" He grasped his stick more firmly and lifted it. "Stop it!" he cried furiously. "Stop it! If you don't put that snake out of sight, I'll break its back."

The snake-charmer ceased playing, and the cobra sank to the ground. A touch of the old man's foot guided its head towards the palm-leaf hut, and it slowly withdrew its scaly length behind the curtain.

There was a rustling in the jungle, and a sound of horses' hoofs on the path. Charnes and Gay burst through into the glade, coming out almost immediately behind Dakshi's hut. They stared at Smith, and he returned their gaze for just ten seconds. Then Gay, looking round, cried with pleasure—

"Hello! Why, it's my old friend, the Gipsy; and we have come upon his camp! How interesting, Salaam, old appa (father)! How is your friend the nella pambu (good snake)?"

Dakshi smiled, he did not understand what she said, as she spoke English; but he caught the words "appa" and "nella pambu."

"How are you, Mr. Smith?" she continued, jumping off her horse with the lightheartedness and independence of a boy. She held out her hand. "It is a surprise to find you here."

"I don't know why you should be surprised," replied Smith, as though he was not quite pleased with her observation. "I told you I was buying snakes for the municipality of a Japanese town. I have just secured six from this old snake-charmer, Dakshi. I've given him two rupees each. Would you like to know how much they will fetch if I can succeed in having them delivered alive and in good condition? Two hundred rupees each!"

Charnes was occupied with tying up the horses near to the spot where the donkeys were tethered.

"A big profit," remarked Gay.

"Think of the risk I run! I pack them in large airy baskets, but only one snake in ten reaches its destination in good condition. It is difficult to feed them. The frogs and mice die on the way. If the climate were not so warm and

moist I might send them in a state of hibernation. Come this way, Miss Goldenham. I can show you one of the finest views we have in the island."

He led the way out of the forest on to a narrow stretch of coarse grass which ended abruptly in a magnificent cliff of bare rock.

Immediately at the foot of the cliff and at the head of a wide valley nestled the Sinhalese village. Round about the village were patches of cultivation where the dark glistening foliage betrayed the coffee bush.

Beyond the village and extending for mile upon mile was the jungle of the foothills. Still further lay stretches of coarse lemon grass, rough and tussocky. Wherever water found its way over the remote grass undulations large kumbuk trees marked its course.

Man claimed his patch here and there, but the greater part was still the home of the deer and the wild pig, with the stalking leopard lurking ever on their tracks.

The jungle of the middle distance was of a rich dark green broken by the crimson shoots or snowy blossom of some tree. The green merged into a deep azure blue that quivered with the heat of the low country. It was impossible to tell where the earth and the sea met or where the horizon melted into the sky. A veil of haze hid the secrets of the far distance.

Gay was enchanted. Her love for the island, the land of her birth, was not confined to the forest. She drew a deep breath of delight; but no word escaped her lips. Charnes had joined her. She knew the bent of his mind, and though he might sympathize with her to a certain extent, he could not feel the romance that mingled with her delight. As for Smith, she did not know him intimately enough to be sure of him. Did the jungle appeal to his sense of beauty, or was it interesting only for the wild creatures it contained, and which were just now the objects of his pursuit?

"The Gipsies have chosen their camping-ground well," observed Smith.

Charnes raised his eyebrows as though he would ask why; but Gay understood what was left unsaid. She turned to Smith with a look that sent the blood rushing through his veins.

"Ah! You recognize the fascination of a roving camp life then; the delight of being able to go just where the fancy dictates. Sometimes I feel half a Gipsy myself. The forest draws me to it as the sea draws the sailor. The sailor is a kind of Gipsy. His ship is his camp, and he makes his anchorage where he likes. The forest is not unlike the sea in some respects. It covers unknown depths and hides its inhabitants under its sea of foliage. It has its secrets, too, like the sea."

He gave her a quick glance, and was satisfied that there was no hidden meaning in her words.

"Perhaps the secrets are the attraction it has for you—without your knowing it," he said. His words jarred slightly. Feminine curiosity was not one of her weaknesses, and he ought to have been aware of it. She turned away and looked at Charnes, who had wandered off to a point by himself where he could see the village more clearly.

"Forgive me, I ought not to have said that. I did not mean it," he said. Her eyes were back again on his face. "Should I have mentioned it if I had been convinced that it was so?" he pleaded. "Speech is given us to hide our thoughts as well as to convey them. I am going to be honest because I am sure of your sympathy. Miss Goldenham," he paused, as though plucking up his courage to make a confession, "when my eyes rest on a scene like this, I, too, feel its lure; but the lure is different. You would be content to wander and to enjoy, like the Gipsy, on sufferance. It would not suffice for me. When I feel attracted it rouses in me a passionate desire for possession. Nothing but absolute possession satisfies me, whether it be land or wealth or—a—" He broke off sharply, but the unspoken word "woman" was projected into her mind by the force of telepathy.

It did not convey its full import, for Gay was curiously inexperienced in the psychology of the world. At the same time it stirred her sleeping soul though it did not awake it. Her eyes turned towards the scene that lay at her feet, and a curious little streak of triumph passed through her. It was the sense of power that thrilled her. She had caused him to reveal his innermost feelings for her alone.

This sense of triumph in power over the man is a danger to all girls in their development. By many it is mistaken

for love. She draws the man to her ; marvels because he is subjugated ; she flutters and thrills and believes that she is in love, and the disillusion too often comes when it is too late to rectify the mistake.

Gay was not in love with Smith, nor, as far as she knew, with any other man. Living with her brother a sheltered life on the estate, she had escaped the flirtations that form the woman's education in emotion, and which teach her to "find herself" like a ship on her first voyage. She had sufficient instinct to be conscious that he was attracted ; but she was in complete ignorance from lack of experience as to what the end might be.

The silence between them was broken by Charnes, who was like a brisk healthy breeze to a mist. His presence dispersed romance and sentiment. Gay's momentary sense of elation passed, and her companion closed the door on his unrehearsed little confession and locked it.

"I've been watching the people in the village," said Geoffrey, with a puzzled expression. "There seems to be a gathering of some sort. It can't be a market, as I see no baskets nor stalls. They are moving out of the village."

Smith went to the edge of the precipice and returned immediately.

"You have a long ride before you, Charnes ; hadn't you better be going ?" he asked.

"I'm ready as soon as Miss Goldenham is ready to start," he replied.

"I am not ready, Mr. Smith," answered Gay. "There is no hurry. The horses want ten minutes' rest. We have promised to meet Mrs. Loveden and Nurse Catherine with the children at what we call the picnic glade. They are to have tea there, and I have promised some of the children to let them ride home on our horses."

She showed no disposition to move. Smith glanced at her uneasily, but made no further effort to speed her departure.

"I can smell the warm flower-laden air of the low country," she remarked.

"The proverbial spicy breezes," laughed Smith.

"Have you ever been down in those jungles ?" she asked.

"No, and what is more, I don't think I wish to go," replied Smith. "Think of the snakes and loathsome insects,

the leeches in the swamps, ticks and hornets in the grass, bees in the rocks and stinging ants in the trees ready to drop down your neck as you pass underneath ! ”

“ One might do it with a guide, one of these Gipsy fellows,” said Charnes.

“ I don’t see what good it would do,” said Smith. “ You wouldn’t like it, Miss Goldenham.”

“ I should love it—except for the insect life. The orchids and ferns alone would be worth seeing, and then think of the gorgeous birds and butterflies——” She stopped abruptly and looked towards the village. “ What is that noise ? It sounds as if a crowd were coming—a crowd of excited men.”

“ Let me fetch your horse for you,” said Smith. “ Charnes, take Miss Goldenham away. Those hill Sinhalese may be disagreeable if they have been drinking—which is very likely to be the case.”

It was a simple thing to say, “ Take Miss Goldenham away,” but Gay was not to be moved or led like one of the Gipsies’ pack-animals. She answered for herself.

“ No use trying to drive me off the scenes, Mr. Smith. I shall wait and see what these people want.”

She moved at a leisurely pace towards the Gipsy encampment. In less than five minutes the cause of the distant clamour was explained. A crowd of young Sinhalese burst upon them from the gully by which they had climbed to the top of the cliff. As they ran along the edge of the precipice their voices were raised to shouting pitch.

“ They mean mischief,” remarked Charnes, who was beginning to feel a little anxious for Gay’s sake.

“ Not to us,” replied Smith. “ They are angry with the Gipsies and I think they intend to drive them away. They lose their fowls and vegetables, and put down the loss to the Gipsies, whether rightly or wrongly it isn’t for me to say.”

“ Have they any proof that the Gipsies are the thieves ? ” asked Gay.

“ Not that I know of. The Gipsies are far too clever to leave proof of their pilfering. Won’t you go, now that you have seen the Sinhalese ? ”

“ It would be best,” added Charnes.

“ For me, perhaps ; but not for the Gipsies,” was the reply, as she stood her ground with the two men.

G

CHAPTER IX

THE Gipsy camp became suddenly alive with movement at the sound of the men's voices. The children, flushed like a brood of jungle fowl chickens, scattered with inarticulate cries into the forest, taking cover with curious furtive movements. Maridi and the bigger boys drove off the donkeys. The dogs sneaked away out of sight, but at no great distance from the huts. In less than sixty seconds the place was apparently deserted, except for Dakshi and two of the younger men who stood before the entrance of the larger hut. They waited for the development of the situation like startled animals ready to act on the defensive should it be necessary or to take flight.

The hillmen came on with a rush. Some of them carried rice-pounders, others had armed themselves with quart bottles filled with sand and attached to a short piece of rope—dangerous weapons if brought down in full force upon the skull. A few had clubs spiked with long nails that were thrust through the head of the club and sharpened at each end.

Suddenly the crowd stopped. The leader, who was no other than Asseri himself, caught sight of Charnes and Miss Goldenham, upon whose presence he had not reckoned. Charnes stepped forward.

"What do you want, headman? And how is it that these men with you are armed?" he asked in the native tongue.

Asseri was at a loss to reply. "We—we come to perform a necessary business."

"What is it?"

"These jungle men, the sons of wild pigs and monkeys, they must go. This part of the forest belongs to the village. It is the part in which they have the right to cut firewood." Asseri spoke in a loud voice and his manner lacked courtesy.

The Englishman's face lowered as the headman continued. "If they will not go when ordered, we will break down their dog-kennels of huts——"

Charnes turned to the old Gipsy. "You hear what the headman says. What is your answer to this threat?"

"The forest belongs to the Government. If the Government Agent orders us to go, we must go; not to-day, but to-morrow."

"The Government Agent does not object to your being here. It is these hillmen who complain of your presence."

"I stay here, then," replied Dakshi; and the younger Gipsies growled their assent.

Asseri spoke to his men, and there was an unfriendly demonstration. Clubs and staves were raised threateningly.

"No violence!" warned Charnes. "If there is any violence I shall inform the police."

At the mention of the word police the Sinhalese fell back. They were aware that the police would regard their possession of arms with a suspicious eye. They conferred among themselves, and one or two urged Asseri in a low voice to wait until the Englishmen had departed. They would not stay long, as their honours were far from their homes. After they had gone the Gipsies could be dealt with.

The snake-charmer divined their intention. He approached Charnes, and said in a low voice—

"Excellency, I will go. I and my people will move to-morrow at dawn."

"Where will you camp?"

"Over the ridge on your honour's side of the jungle if the lady and her brother will give permission."

"He says he will come over on our side of the forest," said Charnes to Gay. "What will your brother say to that?"

"Oh, Fred won't mind. By all means let the poor things come. I think it is shameful turning them out of their camp in this way. They don't do any harm."

"What about your fowls and vegetables?"

"Old father!" cried Gay in Tamil to Dakshi. "If you come on our side of the mountain there must be no fowl stealing."

Dakshi wagged his head in violent assent, and volubly assured Charnes that not a bird should be touched. The

jungle contained enough wild meat to satisfy him and his people. They were a small party. He did not wish to go far as he had a son who was laid up with an injured foot. The lad had been climbing a tree to gather honey. The bees attacked him and he fell.

"Where is the boy?" asked Gay, ready at once to offer help.

Dakshi nodded his head in the direction of the larger hut. Meanwhile the Sinhalese had remained quiet under the impression that negotiations were going on. Charnes walked up to them and spoke. He had nothing but his riding-cane in his hand. He held it up to gain a hearing.

"The Gipsies agree to move," he announced.

"They must go far down into the jungle twenty miles away," cried a young man who had assumed a deputy leadership under Asseri.

"That is impossible. They would be eaten alive by leeches and ticks. They will move over the ridge to the other side, where they will be out of your way. Now, go back to your village quietly, and put away those rice-pounders and clubs. If the police know that you are armed in this manner they will hold an inquiry, and it may be difficult for you to give them a satisfactory explanation."

He spoke slowly, and as his words penetrated, the crowd melted away leaving only Asseri and his deputy there. Charnes turned on him, his manner altering to something less conciliating.

"Look here, headman Asseri!" he said sternly. "This sort of thing won't do. You will get yourself and your people into trouble. The possession of arms is illegal, even if they are only in primitive form. Besides, what is the meaning of it? Men don't assemble in numbers carrying weapons like those just to pay visits to their neighbours."

"They have come to attend a meeting of our society, the Buddhist Society."

"Then why armed?"

Asseri was at a loss to reply. He stammered a lame excuse, pleading the necessity of men being provided with some weapon of defence in these days when nations were at war with each other.

"The war is thousands of miles away from here,"

responded Charnes. "Your excuse would carry no more weight with the police than it does with me. Take my advice if you want to keep out of trouble. Make the members of your society, whatever it may be, lay aside their clubs, and behave themselves in an orderly manner."

Asseri was visibly uncomfortable under the fire of the Englishman's eye and lash of his tongue. Two or three times his glance was directed towards Smith, who wore an expression of amusement and contempt on his face, and carefully avoided the headman's gaze.

"Very well, sir. I will do what you wish. If the jungle men clear out at dawn to-morrow we shall be satisfied."

Again his eye sought Smith's, who up to the present had not spoken. As if in answer, the planter said—

"Give the men time to pack up their talipot huts, man! Poor things! It's bad enough to have to move at all before they need. They have only been here three days. I don't see why they should not remain the usual length of time."

"Your honour said——" began Asseri.

"I! I said nothing about the Gipsies being here!" cried Smith, with annoyance. "All I want to know is where they camp so that I may get at them, and buy their snakes. I want six dozen at least; possibly more. I am sure to lose seventy per cent. on the journey to Japan. Old man, where are you going to camp to-morrow?" he asked, turning suddenly on Dakshi.

"That is a matter, your honour, which we shall settle over the camp fire to-night."

Asseri looked at Smith as though he would have said more, but thinking better of his intention he turned on his heel and left without a word, a piece of studied discourtesy towards all present.

"We had better be going, Gay," said Geoffry, moving towards the spot where he had tied the horses.

As if by magic the women and children with the donkeys and dogs had reappeared. The Gipsies gathered together to see the wonderful white people mount. They were divided in opinion as to Gay's sex. Long hair in the cast may belong to the man as well as the woman. They were inclined to the belief that she was a boy, although the old snake-charmer knew better.

As soon as Gay was mounted she rode up to Smith.

"It was very good of you to take the part of the Gipsies. Good-bye, I suppose you won't be coming back yet."

"In an hour's time. May I stop at the bungalow on my way?" he asked with just diffidence enough to make her reply warmly with the unfailing hospitality of the planter community.

"Do, by all means, and stay to dinner."

Then she turned to Dakshi, who had never moved from the proximity of the larger hut, and said—

"Come over to our side, and we will do what we can for you."

"You are very good to these wild men of the woods," said Smith, looking up into her eyes.

"Let us be going, Gay!" called Geoffry, as he pressed his heels into his horse's flanks and sent it briskly up the jungle track. "We shall be late and it's impossible to hurry, the going is so rough."

The Gipsies watched them ride away. Men, women, and children stood in a group as if for mutual protection like a herd of forest deer. Smith's eyes followed Gay and Charnes, and when they were out of sight he hurried off in the direction of Asseri's village.

"Our visit to the camp was not very fortunate," observed Charnes over his shoulder as he led the way.

"On the contrary, I think it was distinctly fortunate for the old snake-charmer and his tribe that we happened to come when we did. We were able to stand between him and those angry villagers, and to arrange a settlement of their quarrel, whatever it was."

"Smith might have done the same if he had chosen," grumbled Charnes.

"He is too indifferent to his fellow-creatures' comfort. As long as he gets his snakes and wild beasts he doesn't really care what happens to the Gipsies. He is peculiar, not like other men. I can't help thinking that there is something mysterious in his past that he doesn't want us to know."

Geoffry smiled, but as he was riding in front of Gay, she did not see the smile. Only let a girl suspect a mystery and her attention is at once caught and held, was his thought.

As he did not reply Gay continued talking as if she were speaking her thoughts aloud.

"Mr. Smith is always so pleased when I listen ; and yes, I do like giving pleasure. It is so easy to be kind."

Charnes dug his unspurred heels into his horse's sides with unnecessary energy. The good beast was doing its best to get along over the rough track.

"And I like talking to Mr. Smith—when he is sensible," admitted Gay, frankly, so frankly that Geoffry ought to have had no qualms of doubt as to her feelings for the man. "I am sorry for him in a way. He has plenty of acquaintances but no friends. Men will go to his bungalow and enjoy the good things he provides, and there it ends."

"I am not one of that crew," interrupted Charnes.

"No ; it is not the sort of acquaintanceship that appeals to a man of your age and standing."

Geoffry made an impatient movement in the saddle as though it was not as comfortable as it might be. Gay's allusion to his age always affected him oddly. It roused a longing in him to assure her that he was not old, a desire that was over-ruled by another—not to imperil the position she herself had assigned to him as an old and privileged friend.

"Think of the pleasure it must be to those men who live a rough picnic life in the far corners of the district with nobody but a cooly cook to prepare their food."

Charnes remained silent. Conversation was not easy when remarks had to be thrown over a shoulder at some one who was out of the line of vision. What a child Gay was ! The motherly instinct had developed strongly within her long before love was born. Perhaps it was because she had no mother herself. She mothered the children she had gathered round her ; she wanted to protect the Gipsy tribe from ill-treatment ; and now, here she was giving her friendship to a man of whom she knew nothing—except that, like her brother, he was a planter with other irons in the fire besides tea—because he seemed to be friendless.

Charnes was uncomfortably conscious of a sense of irritation. He was angry with Smith for being there when he had counted on having the place to himself and Gay. He was annoyed with the Sinhalese for creating a disturbance

and spoiling the afternoon. Moreover, his eyes had been suddenly opened, and his suspicions roused by the sight of the crowd armed in that manner. It boded a disturbance of the peace of some sort.

Only three days ago he had received a letter from the police office of the district asking if he would consent to be sworn in as a special constable ; it seemed likely that they would be required before long, as there was a spirit of unrest abroad that might mean anything.

He had replied, consenting to the proposition. At the same time he pointed out that no sign was visible in his neighbourhood of any tendency to rioting. The country was in its normal condition of peaceful agriculture.

The sight of the men, many of whom must have come from the villages lower down, had caused him to alter his opinion as to the peaceful condition of the district. Moreover, he was beginning to ask himself how those men procured the arms they carried. Clubs and rice-pounders were primitive in construction, but they cost something to make. Who supplied the money ? The men were not likely to spend their own over them. If the headman provided the weapons Charnes was convinced, from the knowledge he had of the Sinhali, that Asseri would not do it out of his own pocket.

Geoffry's thoughts, however, did not dwell long on Asseri. They were called back to the obnoxious Smith by another remark from Gay.

"Mr. Smith is a curious mixture of kindness and—and——" she stopped, at a loss for a word to express what she meant. "Of kindness and cruelty—no, not cruelty, that is too severe a word ; kindness and indifference would be better, an indifference that might be cruel in its effect."

Charnes pulled up and backed his horse into the undergrowth.

"You ride on in front, Gay ; then you can set your own pace," he said.

Accustomed to obey him in small matters such as this, she obediently rode on. If she led it was possible, he thought, that she might give up her attempt at conversation. He was sick of the name of Smith. If the road had been suitable he would have plunged forward at a mad gallop, and have worked off his irritation in violent exercise. As that was

impossible he craved for the luxury of silence. With her figure before his eyes he might calm his riotous mind, which was breeding insane jealousy with every fresh mention of the other man's name. The sight of her swaying form as she sat her horse straight and supple as a schoolboy produced a sense of possession that was calming; and while he rode, his brain was busy sorting out the confusion that had been wrought by the happenings of the afternoon.

With his eyes riveted on the rider in front Charnes faced the situation boldly. He was not the man to shrink from difficulties. On the other hand, there was a strain of caution in him which controlled the impulse to put forth his hand and take what he craved for. He was haunted by the fear that he might lose her if he spoke inopportunately.

He was aware that he was in love with Gay, and did not attempt to hide the fact from himself or any one else who chose to observe it. The knowledge had been a delight in the joy of anticipation; and up to the present no rival had come to disturb his peace of mind. He had felt confident that sooner or later she would awaken in his arms to a knowledge of her kingdom.

To-day, seeing her with Smith, a man of whom she had said not so long ago that she should not care if they never met again, Charnes had arrived at a further knowledge of himself and his needs.

He realized with something of a shock that he was like the fool who sits under the plum tree waiting for the plums to fall into his mouth. Here was a man undaunted by a woman's indifference, doing his best to shake down the coveted prize and carry it off before his eyes.

To trifle with a matter so vital to his happiness was folly. There must be no more waiting. Something must be done before it was too late. It was for him, and him alone, to bring the love light into her dear smiling eyes. It was intolerable to think that it should be achieved by Smith. Smith, indeed! Yet that was what the cursed fellow was after to-day when he showed her the view and held her attention.

Charnes recognized the skill which Smith brought to bear on the execution of his design. It was the skill of a man well versed in the art of wooing a woman. Gay might be

indifferent or even dislike him, but this fact constituted no drawback. On the contrary it added to the zest of the pursuit. Silent and observant Geoffry had noted with growing anger how cleverly Smith felt his way, and how quick he was to discover the best means of ingratiating himself in her eyes.

Sentiment and compliment having failed, he had tried a new method. He had shown a sympathetic friendliness that had at once established confidence. He had induced Gay to talk about herself, not an easy thing to do, as Geoff knew by experience.

A hot impulse prompted Charnes to ride up to her then and there, and pour out his love ; but how could a man propose to a girl's back ? he asked himself, with a grim smile at the humour of the situation. It was impossible. Time and opportunity are needed for all things ; for the killing of an enemy, for the saying of prayers, and for the capture of the human heart. Neither the time nor the opportunity was favourable for the capture of Gay's heart, and the ride back to the picnic glade was made in silence.

CHAPTER X

THE riders reached the picnic spot, where a broad slab of rock flush with the ground gave a dry flat surface for spreading the tea-things. A big mass of rock towered above it, and the hill rose behind in steep ascent. The jungle clung to the face of the mountain with marvellous tenacity, and trees and shrubs leaned over the declivity secured by their tough roots that gripped the rocks. On the other side the hill fell away letting in the afternoon sun, and opening a wide view of the cultivated valley. The long tracts of smooth pruned tea had the appearance of a mantle of velvet, which covered every undulation between the jungle and the meadows by the river.

Gay and Geoffry were greeted by a chorus of little voices.

"Tea, Gay, tea!" "We've had tea!" "But we have kept some for you!" "And oh, there's such a lovely pink sugar cake!"

Nurse Catherine, with the help of the house servants and the two syces who were waiting for the horses, had built a fire on the rock and boiled the kettle. This was all part of the fun for the children, who ran in and out of the smoke till they smelt like little bloaters. Gay and Geoffry were only just in time. Some of the baskets were already packed. Nurse Catherine at once poured out the tea.

"Where's Helen?" asked Gay, looking round.

"Mummy and Uncle Fred is gone to look for Billy's geegee," announced Betty Loveden.

The mention of Billy's mysterious geegee caused most of the children to keep one eye closed, an accomplishment they had by this time mastered.

"Is Fred here?" asked Gay, as she put down her cup.
"I didn't know he was coming."

"He suggested it, and, of course, we were delighted. He has taken Helen to see the sundew. There's a bed of it a little further on. Horrid little plants that live on insects! Now, as you won't have any more tea, please tell me which of the children are to ride, because we ought to be starting for home," said Catherine.

At this moment Fred and Helen appeared. Gay joined them for a moment.

"This is nice of you, Fred, to come out with the little people," she said cordially.

"I had nothing particular to do this afternoon, and I thought I should like to join the party."

"And we were so pleased," said Helen, her colour deepening, and an unconscious light in her eyes. "I've had such an interesting walk. I had no idea the forest was so fascinating."

There was a clamour for Gay among the children. They were waiting impatiently for her to decide who was to ride. Each pony would carry three of them. Before they knew where they were, they found themselves tossed on to the horses' backs. With screams of delight the party started for home, leaving the servants to finish packing the baskets.

Fred, by reason of his lameness, was soon outdistanced; but this did not concern the party, for Helen remained behind to keep him company. Geoffry looked back once or twice, and then glanced at Gay, who seemed unconscious of any forecasting shadow. He caught Catherine's eye. She smiled, and he knew that she was not blind to the shaping of events.

Geoffry walked by the side of his own horse, his hand on the unsteady of the children. Gay was in front ready with the same watchful hand to grab at a leg or an arm where the balance seemed doubtful. Was it possible that she too had seen the attraction and was purposely ignoring it? Perhaps, thought Geoffry, this was Dame Fortune's way of removing a difficulty, or even an obstacle, in the path of his own happiness.

It would be almost impossible to persuade Gay to leave her brother unprovided with a housekeeper. The thought had occurred to Geoffry more than once, and had been one of the causes to hold him back when he might have spoken.

If Fred himself replaced his sister by a wife, which after all would be quite natural, the whole difficulty of leaving the brother would be swept away without further trouble, and the field left clear for himself.

This view produced a curious sense of elation in Charnes. It brought the fulfilment of his dreams nearer. The effect on his spirits showed itself in a sudden joyousness that surprised Gay. When the little riders had to give up their places to those of their companions who had walked, it was Geoffry who entered into the fun and made the displaced little people play at horses and keep in step with the animals. Gay had accused him of not liking children. She felt that she had been hasty and unjust.

"I believe you love the little darlings just as much as I do, Geoff," she said, her eyes smiling at him in a manner that set his blood racing.

"Of course I do! But I don't hug and kiss them as you and Nurse Catherine and Mrs. Loveden do!"

"You would if you lived with them."

"That I can quite believe," he responded warmly, as they started off on their second and last bit of the homeward journey.

He was not in the least likely to find himself living with any children but his own. Her remark lingered in his mind and conjured up visions of Gay with little possessions of her own to hug and kiss.

Half an hour after Gay and Geoffry had left the camp Smith returned. He glanced round in search of the snake-charmer, but Dakshi and his pets had disappeared. Except for the dogs and donkeys the camp was deserted. The women and children had scattered in search of firewood and wild fruits. The men had slipped away one by one in the direction of the Sinhalese village, to prowl on the outskirts, and keep out of sight. They had no definite object in view unless it was to be on the watch for the proverbial opportunity that makes the thief. It was their recreation, their method of passing an idle hour or two that was as natural to them as the desultory prowling of a wild animal that is neither hungry nor sleepy.

Silence reigned, for the dogs knew Smith by smell and sight as an occasional visitor to the camp. As long as he

behaved as usual they had nothing to say. Just as far as their masters had allowed him to come so far they permitted him to intrude again.

Smith stood for a few seconds regarding the scene. He moved cautiously down the row of palm-leaf huts, and stopped in front of the shelter where the old snake-charmer lived.

Two of the dogs lifted their heads and watched him closely. One of them rose to its feet, stretched itself and yawned. Smith was too intent on making his observations to notice their actions. The dog that had risen walked with noiseless unhurried steps, and also approached the hut.

Smith stooped and listened. Within the hut a man groaned as if in pain and murmured, "Appa! appa!" (father). The voice held in it a heartrending appeal from some one who was suffering mentally as well as bodily.

"My son, my son!" was the reply given with infinite pity.

Smith raised himself quickly with a smile of satisfied curiosity. The voice had no nasal twang in it, but the one that replied was unmistakably oriental. There was silence, broken now and then by a stifled cry and confused whispering inside the hut.

"I wonder if that boy, as they call him, has small-pox or any infectious disease that they are hiding," said Smith to himself. "In hiding he may well be; but it will complicate matters for me if he is really ill. He must not die till I have done with him."

Once more there was silence. He waited for some minutes, and then put out his hand towards the curtain with the intention of drawing it aside. Before he could touch it the old dog's muzzle was pressed against his leg with a low warning growl. He stepped back and cursed the dog in no measured way, for he had been unpleasantly startled. His nerves for some reason or other were never good. At that moment the cobra glided from beneath the curtain bringing its scaly length slowly into view. Hathay, the old woman, followed it. She beckoned to the dog, which removed its threatening muzzle from Smith's calf, and obeyed her at once. Tears were streaming down Hathay's cheeks.

"The poor lad, the poor lad!" she moaned. "He suffers, and we cannot cast out the devil that torments him!" She

wiped her eyes on a corner of the old rag of a cloth that was wrapped round her figure. "Your honour wishes to see the master?"

"About the snakes which I have paid for."

"They shall be sent to the headman's bungalow to-night. My grandson will carry them there."

"The headman will return your baskets when your grandson has put the snakes into those I have provided."

"Your honour has spoken, it shall be done."

"What is the matter with the young man inside the hut?" asked Smith, looking keenly at her.

"His leg pains, and he cries aloud. Also he has a devil which is strong and powerful, and it drives him out into the jungle."

"And you beat him till he is quiet, I suppose," remarked Smith, who knew the ways of natives throughout India in cases of derangement called by the people possession by a devil.

"Poor boy! we never beat."

"Has he had any accident before this?"

She looked at him wonderingly, and made a sign of negation.

"Are you sure that he has not lost an eye?" asked Smith.

What she might have answered he could not guess. The cobra that had been lying before the hut reared itself up, spread its hood and emitted a long soft hiss like steam escaping from a pipe.

Smith took a step back and lifted his stick. The dog growled and stiffened itself, the hairs on its back rising. He knew the breed of Gipsy dogs. They had the reputation of being uncertain in their tempers and peculiarly intelligent in obeying signs from their masters. It seemed to him that the cobra had also been educated like the dogs. Smith was determined not to be frightened off the field. He stood his ground when he had put a certain amount of space between himself and the guardians of the hut, and said—

"Let me see the boy. I may be able to give him some medicine that will drive out the devil and help to cure his leg."

Again there was no reply. The old woman's eyes were fixed on him with curious intentness. She was standing

directly in front of the hut. He could not have entered it without thrusting her aside ; and this, with the snake at her feet and the dog stretching its head forward and sniffing at him, he was not prepared to do.

"Very well, as you please. Keep that cobra quiet!" he exclaimed suddenly. "And call off the dog. There's a second cobra behind you. Heavens! the place seems to be swarming with them!" He glanced round with increasing uneasiness. "Why! the jungle is full of them!"

Old Hathay maintained her position and remained standing motionless, like one of the uncouth idols of the Dravidian race. There was a movement behind her. A long thin hand clasped the curtain and an emaciated figure crawled forth from the hut. It moved like a wounded dog on all fours with one leg lifted up to keep the foot off the ground. Round the ankle was bound an old discoloured rag.

Smith stared in astonishment at the lean figure. He had felt morally certain that Dakshi's hut held some secret inmate whose presence was carefully concealed. He felt equally convinced that he knew who it was. The revelation came almost as a shock. It was so entirely different from what he had suspected. In his astonishment he forgot the snakes and dogs, and his terror of them. He could only gaze on the unexpected sight before his eyes, and wonder how it was that he had deceived himself.

At a sign from Hathay the young man crawled forward towards Smith. He sat down at his feet and unwound the rag from his ankle, displaying a large sore that was healing. It was quite sufficient to disable him temporarily, and prevent the devil from driving him far afield. Smith looked closely at him, but could detect no sign of disease. The emaciation might be due to inaction and confinement to the hut, or it might be constitutional.

To make sure that the invalid was not suffering from any complaint, infectious or otherwise, Smith laid an inquiring hand on the lad's bare neck. The skin was cool and healthy. At his touch the youth opened his mouth with a feline drawing back of the lips as a cat opens its mouth to miaou. The faintest of sounds, not unlike the cry of a cat, fell on Smith's ear.

The likeness to the animal jarred on Smith's nerves, and set them quivering again. They had already been unstrung by the vision of snakes conjured up by the Gipsy woman through the strange hypnotic means known to the race all over the world. He glanced round uneasily.

Hathay was still there, her black eyes watchful and observant. By her side stood Dakshi. Where he had sprung from Smith could not have said. He also regarded the European with the same watchful uncanny stare. It gave Smith an uncomfortable sense of being among animals rather than among human beings.

Even the young man at his feet reminded him of an unhappy suffering jungle cat. The figures, human, animal, and reptilian, waited with the instinct and caution of the wild beast for the development of events without themselves assisting in that development.

"Get back to your hut," he said to the youth. "Your wound will be healed before long."

The words did not penetrate the dull brain of the invalid. His parents, thought Smith, were right about his "having a devil." He regarded the poor creature with increasing dislike amounting almost to the repulsion he felt for the snakes. The small black eyes of the lad seemed to have a snake-like expression of distrust; and his movements suggested an intimate association with the reptile pets kept by the tribe. Smith repeated his order to retire, and it was echoed by Dakshi.

The youth wriggled slowly under the curtain with a backward motion, passing over the large cobra lying before the entrance. Even as he moved his eyes never left Smith's face. Fear, cunning, resentment at the stranger's presence shone in that look, and it was a relief to the European when he finally disappeared inside the hut.

There was nothing more to be said, and Smith prepared to go. Dakshi was gliding with noiseless tread towards the thick jungle into which he vanished. Hathay remained, and the planter glanced at her as though he would have renewed his inquiries about her son. He had been so completely out of his calculations that he would have liked to have had an explanation of certain facts that he could not quite reconcile with the appearance of the young Gipsy.

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However, his desire for further speech with her was put to flight by the restlessness of the cobra. It had lifted its head and was beginning to sway to and fro as if in growing irritation at his presence. He retreated, keeping an eye upon the dog as well as the snake. Unfastening his pony he mounted quickly, and set its head homewards.

He rode on without delay till he came to the elephant rocks. The sun was not far from the horizon, and its slanting rays penetrated among the grey boulders and dry vegetation.

A glimpse of a red cloth caused him to pull up sharply. Maridi, all smiles and white teeth, emerged from behind a great boulder. With the shy graceful movements of a fawn she drew near as he sat upon his pony watching her. She wavered in her approach, now overcome with the fear common to the wild animal, now confident with the reason of the human being.

He waited patiently. This was by no means their first meeting in the leafy recesses of the forest. Then he held out his hand. In its palm glittered a gold bead new and fresh from the goldsmith's workshop.

The girl's eyes rested greedily upon it; and the shadow of a smile appeared on the planter's lips. His fingers closed slowly over the bead and the hand was withdrawn.

She gave a little inarticulate cry of disappointment and retreated towards the sheltering boulder which concealed secret ways by which she might escape if she wished. The rosy sunlight caught her where she halted, touching her warm, rich brown skin and crimson drapery.

He drew out a second and a third bead, and opened his hand. Three glittering spots of gold shone on his palm this time. The lure was irresistible. It enticed the shy quarry to come forward a second time in the hope of securing the treasure. She stopped just out of his reach.

"Come here, little Maridi," he said softly. "I want to talk to you."

She glanced round with listening ears, turning her head from side to side and scanning the jungle with sharp eyes.

"Come here, child. Don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you."

He made no attempt to dismount. As long as he continued sitting in the saddle, his feet in the stirrups, she felt that she could dart aside and take cover in the jungle at any moment. Gradually, by little advances, she reached his side. She put out her hand and touched the pony on the neck. Smith leaned forward and began to speak rapidly in a low voice. His words reached her sharp ears. She made no reply, but glanced at him with a slight motion of the head. It seemed to satisfy him.

"Tell me, Maridi, where will the Gipsy master pitch his camp to-morrow?" he asked, as he opened his hand and examined the beads critically.

"Above the waterhole on the path that leads to Devala," she replied.

"You were there three months ago?"

A movement of the head gave assent.

"You will all be there, the whole tribe and all? The sick young man and the old chief and his wife?"

In reply to each question she wagged her head in assent. He held out the three beads.

"Good girl! They are yours, you have earned them. I knew I could not be mistaken, the man I want is there right enough."

She seized the beads with a happy little coo of delight; but before she could escape he had caught her round the neck and taken another payment from her lips. He let her go immediately, and she jumped aside out of his reach, looking at him with a wicked little glint of triumph in her eyes at having this time secured something for nothing. Then she sprang into the jungle and was gone. She threaded her way along tracks made by the jungle pig, indistinguishable to any but the inhabitant of the forest. Here and there she dropped on her hands and knees and passed through tunnels of thick vegetation on all fours worming a serpentine way along the track without stirring the fronds of the ferns or huge leaves of the wild ginger that screened the way.

Her eyes shone with delight, and her heart beat with the knowledge of her possession, the dearest possession of her sex, jewellery. Now and then, where the path opened up a little, she stopped to look at the beads and gloat over their

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colour and glint. They were the first, the very first gold ornaments she had ever possessed. She would not dare to wear them yet. By-and-bye, when she was married, which would be soon, she would be able to string them on one of her pearl-shell bead necklaces. Her people might ask her then as much as they pleased how she got them. She would say that she stole them from one of the Sinhali children belonging to the woodcutters. No one would dare to take them from her when she was married, and had a husband to protect her property.

So engrossed was she with her secret joy that she noticed nothing. She arrived in the camp under cover of the twilight when it was dark enough for her to join the children without attracting notice. The hot sweet coffee was being warmed by the women over the glowing embers of the camp fire, and the gathered crowd was waiting for it eagerly.

A minute after she appeared one of the young Gipsies came quietly into the camp, also without attracting notice. He seated himself by his father's hut, silent and moody. He was the stone-swallower of the Toona Kelli garden conjuring.

A little later, when the supper of hot coffee and cold unleavened millet dumpling was finished, the women and children retired into the palm-leaf huts. The men after a short council followed; and the forest lapsed into the arms of the night and was given over to that noxious furtive world that hated the light.

CHAPTER XI

THERE was trouble and anxiety at Toona Kelli. Betty Loveden was ill. Gay was realizing that she had taken greater responsibilities on her shoulders with regard to other people's children than she had anticipated.

It was all because Betty had developed spots. Spots are the bugbear of every maternal mind. With the mere mention of spots visions of isolation, disinfectants, and special nursing spring up. They appeared to Gay now with increased force as the children were not her own. It was true that part of the responsibility and anxiety regarding Betty was shifted on to the shoulders of Betty's mother; but there were the other children; what of them?

With enormous relief Gay listened to Dr. Caversham as he followed her out of the sick-room towards the drawing-room.

"I am pleased—really delighted for your sake, Miss Goldenham, that I am able to say positively that Betty's complaint is not measles nor anything infectious."

He proceeded to tell her exactly what it was and why spots accompanied the ailment. As he talked he glanced round towards the door.

"I will explain all this to Mrs. Loveden," said Gay, as if in answer to his look. "She will be immensely relieved, I know."

"I was thinking of Nurse Catherine," he said a little diffidently. "I should like to tell her what I have told you and prescribe the treatment. I am too far off, worse luck, to look in every day as I should like to do."

"Betty won't need a visit every day. Your time is rather precious. We know where we are with the complaint, and what to do. I'll go and call Nurse Catherine," replied Gay, as she rose and left the room.

"It would be safer if I could keep a frequent eye on the

child," replied Caversham, when Gay came back. "I will give Nurse Catherine full instructions, if you will allow me, and hold her responsible for carrying out the treatment."

"Perhaps it would be wise since she has had so much experience. Here she comes!"

Gay hesitated; but seeing at a glance that her presence was no longer required she left the room to seek Helen Loveden, and reassure her about Betty. Having done so she did not feel that it was necessary to return to the drawing-room. She was tired from having taken her share in the night nursing. The feverish restless little patient could not be left night or day; and an ayah was not to be trusted alone.

It was at least a week since Gay had been in the forest. The weather had been showery for one reason, and her anxiety and perplexity over the idea of an epidemic in the bungalow had kept her at home.

A glorious afternoon with a brilliant sun tempted her to escape. She put on her hat, and slipping out of the side door of her bedroom, so that the little people playing in the garden should not see and claim her, she went swiftly towards the narrow entrance to the forest arched over by the trees that stood on each side. It was like the entrance to a temple; but beyond those sentinel trees there was no temple of wide noble spaces, no breadth of vision. The path, even though cut out and saved from the encroaching jungle, was nothing but a walled and covered way made of the most exquisite ferns, shrubs, creepers and pillared canopy of foliage.

Once in the company of her beloved trees she slackened her pace. The winding path hid her from view; she was as much alone as though she had closed the door behind her, and shut out the little domestic world with its invalid child and accompanying anxiety.

She had no intention of going far. All she craved for was just a period of mental isolation and rest from human voices and human needs—not an unusual requirement with Gay.

Now that she did not fear pursuit, she strolled on with a luxurious sense of ease and leisure. She listened for the familiar sounds of the forest. They needed experienced

ears to catch them, for there was no clamouring close at hand. The breeze whispered in the foliage high above her head; the birds twittered over their afternoon meal in subdued undertones; the hoo! hoo! hoo! of the monkeys echoed from the far distance; the whirring of the cicalas was softened as it came from a ledge of sun-warmed rock on the mountain-side. Occasionally the boom of a horny beetle fell on her ear as it spread its wings of gauze and took a blind headlong flight—guided by unerring scent—towards the place where its eggs might be laid in safety. The wide perspective of the many voices of the tropical forest is often called silence; the unpractised ear fails to detect them, and listens only for the familiar thrush and wood pigeon of our English woods, birds that sing at our very elbows in the old country.

Gay looked up at the canopy of foliage a hundred feet or more above her head—a leafy world thickly populated by a community of its own. Large strong-winged butterflies fluttered through the streaming sunshine, intent only on obeying nature's command and fulfilling their part in keeping up the continuity of life.

Now and then a whiff of scent from some richly dowered blossom met her nostrils. The call of the blossom was not for her. It was for the bee which was to render unconscious aid in furthering the schemes of nature. The bee obeyed the summons and trailed its pollen-laden limbs over the receptive flowers as it gathered with feverish haste its last load of honey to be carried to the dripping combs among the rocks before the sun disappeared.

Gay stood still and drew in a deep draught of the sweet air. The mental side of her temperament was stilled into peace. This close communion with nature brought an atmosphere of dreams; and though no dream visions arose, seeing that she was wide awake and keenly sensitive to the world around her, she felt the luxurious abandonment that is often a feature of real dreams.

Anxiety, thought of the future, trouble over the present died down and melted away under the influence of trees and flowers, mosses and ferns, birds and butterflies.

A secluded garden holds the same charm, but not to the same extent as wild tropical unfenced nature. The garden with its protected cultivation, its imposed artificial order

brings lethargic peace that is soporific and deadening even while it is restful to the senses. Tropical nature that has never felt the restraining hand of man lures the spirit to a keen greedy enjoyment of the beauty of mother earth. Sympathy with the living creatures of the forest leads to sharing their *joie de vivre*. The wild animal playing with its mate, the butterfly dancing in the hot sun, the bird tumbling for pure pleasure in and out of the foliage, the brilliant metallic-tinted dragon-fly zigzagging in the warm air are not shows to please the eye of an idle gazer. They are threads and links by which the joy of living is communicated to all who enter their magic sphere. The very shade of the jungle assists. Light, the symbol of mysterious spirituality, is restricted and held at arm's length by the leafy roofing. It seems as though the trees joined with the glowing active life of the animal and insect world in casting a spell on all those who have eyes to see and ears to hear the magic call of the tropical forest.

Gay reached the spot where a fallen tree provided her with a natural resting-place. The great giant, born many centuries ago, had faithfully accomplished its destiny. Its foliage and flowers had sustained innumerable species of the insect world; its bark had been the shelter of the beetle race; its fruit had fed the wild pig, the jackal and the rat tribe; its branches had securely borne the nests of countless birds. Now, lying low in death, its wood fed the fungus and the scaly woodlouse.

A footstep on the path woke her from her abandonment to the sweet influences in which she was steeped. She looked up and saw Geoffry striding down from the distant ridge. The sight of him made her heart leap with a curious sense of joy. Of all people he was the only one in her present mood whom she was prepared to welcome. Any other person would have jarred on her nerves and awakened an impulse to return straightway to her duties at home.

As Geoffry recognized the figure seated on a limb of the old tree his face betrayed a pleasure he could not hide.

"Gay, by all that is lucky! I didn't hope to find you here!"

"And why?" she asked, looking up at him with those smiling, shining eyes that reflected his own joy.

"Thought you were chained to Betty's sick-room. How is the child?"

He took a seat on the log by her side, and laid a possessive hand on hers by way of greeting. She did not repulse him. Although the forest held no romance for Charnes, and was no more to his practical mind than a valuable reserve of timber and virgin soil, he never seemed to Gay to be out of tune with it, like John Smith, who cursed the brambles and the snakes and the Gipsies as if they constituted the forest. Gay gave an account of the invalid, adding the cheering news that the doctor had declared the complaint to be non-infectious.

Geoffrey appeared to be listening. His eyes were on Gay, and every word she spoke was dear to his ears. She had released her hand from his clasp under pretence of brushing away a small insect that had lost its bearings on her skirt.

"Fred has been so good about it all; so sorry for Mrs. Loveden; and kind in taking her out for walks when she has had a long spell in the sick-room," continued Gay.

His attention was suddenly caught, and he was listening now with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

"What do you think of it all, little chum?" he asked, as she ceased speaking.

She looked at him and understood. "I shall be pleased to see Fred happy at any time. Could I be otherwise, Geoff?"

"No, dear, you couldn't."

"Fred will make the best of husbands. He is not perhaps quite so thoughtful for others as—as some people. It is because he is lame and has always required the care of others stronger than himself. But he is kindness itself, and he loves Betty and Billy."

Geoffrey did not join in her praise of her excellent brother. His eyes rested on her as she talked, and when she had finished he asked—

"Should I make a good husband?"

"Oh, splendid!" she responded quickly. Then suddenly her eyes fell, and her level brows contracted. A disturbing thought flashed through her brain.

"That's all right, beloved," he replied.

"Why—you're not thinking——" She hesitated, unaccountably confused, while the shadow of an amused smile appeared on his face.

A pair of birds came tumbling through the foliage above and fell with fluttering wings into the undergrowth of the forest, where they continued to scuffle and chirp in their game of love or war.

"Yes, I am," he said, after a slight pause. He spoke deliberately, and with the confidence of a man who has made up his mind and well considered the step he was about to take.

The smile in Gay's eyes vanished, and she turned upon him with opening lips as though she would ask a question; but the question did not come. He had startled her. Somehow it was easy to relinquish Fred and give him over to the full possession of another woman; but Geoffry—to whom she so often went for advice, not to say comfort, when she was in any difficulty or trouble! Was he about to be taken from her—appropriated by some one with whom she was not intimate and perhaps not acquainted with?

"You ask me who she is," he went on smoothly and with keen enjoyment.

"No, I didn't," replied Gay, shortly. "I never said a word."

"She is the love of my life. Gay! I am going to marry you—and—none—other."

Gay gasped for her breath. She could not speak. She could only look into his eyes. They were eloquent and said a great deal more than his lips.

The stars had not fallen nor had there been any convulsion of nature. The sun was still shining, and the quarrelsome pair of flutterers had become pacifists, and were seated amicably on a bough above. The butterflies opened their wings to the afternoon sun, and the bees hummed over the flowers. Gradually the sensation of bewilderment passed. Gay saw something in her companion's eyes that awoke a strange response. A glad happiness was dawning that thrilled while it startled her. Had that look been there before? And had she been blind to it in her care for the children and her self-forgetfulness?

Yet Geoffry was no different from his usual self. There

was the same vigorous steadfastness that she had known from a child ; the same reliability so comforting to lean upon. Where was this wonderful change, this indefinable opening out of new worlds ? Could it be in herself ?

As she sat silent gazing across the threshold of the newly opened door into an unknown world of emotion, he watched the change that was taking place under his eyes. He was like a musician who draws the bow across the strings of his beloved instrument, and marvels himself at the sweetness and beauty resulting from his touch.

Often had Geoffrey thought of the awakening of Gay. Often had his heart failed him as he considered the possibility of that awakening coming in response to the call of another. Often lately he had hesitated and kept silence when he might have spoken, afraid lest he should rush in unseasonably. The few attempts he had made to break the old ties of childhood had not been encouraging, and he had desisted from sheer fright of losing her.

Even now when she flushed warmly under the newborn emotion, he watched with a shadow of anxiety for a sudden shrinking back into the old relationship. It was such a delicate sensitive little plant that was springing up ; any attempt to rush it into the full strength of maturity might destroy it.

He kept a firm grip of himself as he slipped nearer to her on the log. He felt her form against his arm, and the touch sent a thrill through him. He raised his hand and took up one of the little curls on the back of her neck. He drew the soft silky strand slowly through his fingers two or three times. His touch upon her hair threw a spell over her, and he watched the springing emotion strengthening with each minute that passed.

" Geoff ! " she cried at last, as with an effort she found speech again. " Geoff ! We are not engaged ; we can't be ! It seems—— "

" Yes, little chum, it seems what ? "

He took hold of another curl behind her ear and drew it lingeringly to its full length, which was surprising, as the curl lay so closely to her neck. The words he spoke were as soft and gentle as his touch.

" —so—so preposterous ! "

"Does it?"

His idle sleepy tone made her turn and look at him. This was a new Geoffry, and yet his possessive attitude was very like the old when he was masterful and positive.

"Don't you understand? This is sheer madness. I can't, I can't be engaged!"

"Very well, dearest, as you please. You can marry me without any engagement."

"But I haven't said I would marry you!" she cried, her blood tingling with the thought in spite of the words her lips spoke.

"No need to say it if you would prefer to be silent."

How those fingers playing with her hair mesmerized her into quietude! No one had ever touched her in that way. She struggled against the spell and roused herself into fresh effort to explain.

"And, Geoff! I am not going to promise that I will—will—er—marry you."

"I haven't asked you to give me any promise," he replied, his voice sinking lower than before.

"Then—then—where are we?"

"In a forest of delight!" he murmured in her ear.

She laughed softly, and the laugh caused his heart to bound with joy and hope. It told him that she was not frightened. Again she shot an inquiring glance at him. He was in a mood new to her. The forest, his forest of timber and soil, a forest of delight! Under a curious sense of duty to him and herself she made yet another effort to re-establish the old relations; but somehow her childishness had slipped off like a gossamer rag, and she could not gather it round her again.

Meanwhile Geoff's fingers were still occupied. This time he had designs on her sunhat. He drew out the hatpins, and took off her hat. He placed his own felt terai on the log and balanced hers on the top.

"Who gave you leave to take such a liberty?" she asked.

"No one. Listen, Gay, I have something to say."

She felt the clasp of his fingers upon her arm, and she was drawn closer till her head rested against him. It was a comfortable position. She remembered it of old, when

she was a child, and when she accepted it with a child's confidence and affection. In such a position he had been wont to comfort and encourage her when she had brought her little peck of troubles, and poured them into his sympathetic ears. But again the fairy rags of past childhood fell away leaving something new, something infinitely more precious than the old friendship. She yielded involuntarily to the new joy, and he felt her quiver as she suddenly pressed her cheek with a quick little movement against his coat.

Again the temptation seized him to lean over and take the sweetness of her lips ; but he had himself well in hand ; he could be patient and bide his time when the shy bird would not be alarmed and oppose him with flutterings and chirrupings.

" I am going away from Wanna Wella early to-morrow morning, and I am not sure when I shall be back. I told Rosario, my boy, to bring my suit case to your bungalow as I want to dine with you and spend my last evening at Toona Kelli."

" Where are you going, Geoff ? " Gay asked in surprise ; he seldom left his estate.

" I have been sworn in as a special constable. There is trouble brewing round Kandy, and in the town itself. It will take the form of street riots between the Sinhalese and the Moormen. There is a deeper meaning, however, lying under the movement. It is directed in reality against the English. You remember those men we saw with Asseri the headman of the village below the Gipsy encampment ? "

" Yes ; unpleasant-looking men bent on mischief."

" You saw how they were armed ? Well, the whole island is armed, as far as the Sinhalese are concerned, in a similar manner."

" How did they get the arms ? "

" Ah ! you may well ask ! It is what we all want to know. We have our suspicions, and good reason for them. They have been introduced through German influence."

" What will happen ? " asked Gay, a vague dread at her heart.

" Houses will be burned ; peaceful Muhammadan traders will have their shops looted, and they themselves will be

murdered. Then as soon as the British specials backed by the police and the few European troops we have left appear on the scenes to restore order, they will be attacked viciously. The fools! They have been deluded into the belief that the headman of Kandy will be made king, and Asseri and others like him will be elected on the council of the new ruler."

As he talked of these impersonal affairs he was not unmindful of the business he had in view. He lifted Gay's hand and pressed it to his lips, pausing in between his sentences.

"You will be armed?" she asked.

"With a revolver," he replied; and there was silence.

She rested quietly for a space, thinking over what he had told her. Suddenly she raised her chin so that she could see his face as she leaned against him. Withdrawing her hand from his clasp she slipped it round his neck.

"Geoff dear, don't get killed! I can't spare you!" she said; and he felt another little quiver pass through her form.

For answer he took what he had been longing for and waiting for with the patience of a strong man who knows that victory must be his. He was not repulsed.

Later Geoffry returned the hat and pins that he had taken from Gay and replaced his own hat upon his head. The sun had reddened with its rosy setting light, gilding the tree-trunks, and searching corners and recesses of the forest with the fleeting touch of its last flaming glance. The day-loving blossoms began to shut their petals, and the butterflies closed their curtsying wings as they crept to their night shelters under the broad leaves of the trees. The twitterings and flutterings of the birds became a noisy jangle as they pushed and quarrelled over roosting places where they would be secure against the predatory owl, the wild cat, and the bandicoot of the night. Each sought to secure the inner place, and avoid the dangerous outer circle.

Gay and Geoffry rose from their seat on the log. Gay came back to the workaday world of her life—a large family of other folks' children to mother, and a sick child to help to nurse. She was filled with sudden repentance as she thought of her responsibilities.

"Oh! Geoff! it's so late! I didn't mean to be away so

long. Poor Nurse Catherine! She ought to have had half an hour's walk before sunset. What am I to say?"

"Nothing," he replied contentedly.

She looked at him with a perplexed expression. The situation had changed irrevocably, and to her amazement she had no wish that matters should revert to the old conditions.

"What about ourselves?" she asked.

"There is nothing to say, beloved, since you positively refuse to be engaged as you call it." He slipped an arm into hers. "Come along, little chum, you will be in time for the children's tea or supper, or whatever you call it."

They strolled along towards the bungalow, lingering on the lonely path in spite of Gay's pricking conscience.

"But, Geoff!"

"Beloved!"

"Are you——? Are we——?"

"I will give you a valuable piece of advice in answer to your questions—wait and see."

"What?" she asked, more puzzled than ever.

"What Fred's plans are. If his affairs have gone as smoothly as ours we will fix the day as soon as I come back to Wanna Wella."

"Without being engaged, and without my having consented to marry you? Well, really, Geoff! you're a cool hand!" cried Gay, laughing, in spite of her serious attempt to face what she considered to be the reality of the new situation.

"That's so," he assented. "The only thing that matters to me is the date, the date when I marry *you*; which will be as soon as it is convenient to the parties concerned."

Another turn in the path would take them into view of the bungalow and its out-buildings. Geoffry stopped.

"Not being engaged, dearest, it will be a scandalous thing for me to kiss you in the sight of your astonished family—therefore——"

He wasted no more time over words, but gave his mind to deeds; and his heart leaped within him as he this time recognized a response.

"Well!—really!—Geoff!" cried the newly awakened woman as she found broken opportunities of getting speech.

"You—are—the—last word in—impudence!" And with that he allowed her to finish her walk to the bungalow.

It seemed odd to the self-conscious Gay that no one noticed her return. No one commented on the lateness of her walk nor the arrival of the guest. Charnes was so often a guest at Toona Kelli. He came in when he liked, and no difference was made for him or for any other chance traveller. Above all no one appeared to be aware that the commonplace old world had been suddenly transformed into a marvellous sphere of joy and delight, lifting her from her mental feet, and bewildering her with a vista of happiness.

She went straight into the dining-room, where the little people were already assembled, and poured out the hot milky cocoa that had been prepared for them. Geoffry sought Fred in his office room to smoke and talk shop and Sinhalese sedition. Helen Loveden, who was with Betty, was preoccupied; and Nurse Catherine seemed equally self-absorbed. All Gay elicited from them was the fact that Helen had slipped out with Fred for a walk—whereat Gay smiled happily—as soon as Catherine had returned.

"Did you get a walk after all, then?" asked Gay of Catherine.

"Yes; the Doctor persuaded me to go with him as far as the end of the estate, in fact, he insisted. He said I must have exercise."

"I'm so glad!" cried Gay. "I was dreadfully afraid I had been selfish in staying out so late."

"Not at all, my dear!" replied Catherine. "We didn't even miss you till the children's tea-bell rang: and then I heard from the ayahs that you had just come in. Helen said it was a glorious sunset, well worth waiting for. No, Billy, you really mustn't have a third piece of cake—too much of a good thing!"

"No, it isn't!" he replied stoutly, looking up at her with the aggrieved expression a child puts on when he is unjustly accused. "I heard the Doctor say when he came out of the drawing-room with you that you can't have too much of a good thing. Had you been giving him some cake, Nurse?"

Catherine's colour deepened as she replied hastily—

"No, darling——"

"Well, you gave him something, I know, because he looked

so pleased. Perhaps you gave him chocolates. Oh ! mayn't I have just one wee bit more, Nursey dear ? ”

Catherine handed him the dish, and Billy took the biggest piece with Nurse's full approval this time ; for it was the only way to stop his mouth.

CHAPTER XII

THE Gipsies were true to their word. On the morning of the day following the demonstration by the villagers, the camp was evacuated and nothing remained to show their recent presence but the grey ashes of their fires. There were no scraps of paper nor broken bottles nor empty tins to mark the recent presence of human beings.

Their wandering life was not one that commended itself to the man who loved his home. Even the leopard and the bear had their permanent lairs where their young were born and nurtured in seclusion and comfort. The Gipsies knew the comfort of the cave and solid rock shelter in wet weather, and they sought such retreats when the monsoon rains fell ; but no matter how wet it might be their nomadic instincts obliged them to move, and they trekked to that part of the island that was most sheltered from the monsoon winds.

In the fine dry weather in between the two monsoons the Gipsy people enjoyed their happiest moments. The moisture-loving leech at such times retired to some damp spot to hibernate till the rains returned. The huts could safely be erected over the dried vegetation of the sunny glades. The ant and the mosquito were never totally absent, however, and the open grass lands that looked so inviting were never free from the tick.

The one indulgence of the tribe was drink. The Gipsy does not soak himself by continually imbibing. He looks upon alcohol as a pleasure to be reserved for special occasions. Every domestic event, the naming of a child, the marriage of a girl, the death of an old man, is made the excuse for a deliberate debauch that extends even to the children. When

it is over the various members of the tribe, old and young, pull themselves together and resume their course of life with admirable sobriety. For these occasional drinking orgies they prefer to be as far away as possible from the haunts of civilization. They go into retreat in the remote depths of the forest, and reappear at the end of six or seven days prepared to take up the threads of their daily life as usual—hunting for the pot, catching snakes and monkeys alive, and pilfering the gardens and fowl-roosts and coffee stores of the Sinhalese villages. The pilfering is not done on a large scale; it nevertheless irritates and rouses the wrath of the villagers until the bounds of endurance are passed, and a demand is made that the tribe should depart.

Dakshi's tribe always pitched their camp in the same order. The palm-leaf huts were arranged in a neat row, and each hut contained a whole family. The last hut in the line was larger than the rest, and was occupied by Dakshi, the chief, Hathay, the old woman, and the son who was temporarily disabled by the sore place on his ankle.

At night, presumably the son, tall and lank in form, crept out into the darkness and wandered away by himself under the tropical starlight. For a man who was lame he walked with astonishing ease. He moved furtively, taking cover constantly, like some one pursued by a deadly enemy.

The old snake-charmer never failed to note his coming and going. Each time he issued from the hut Dakshi rose noiselessly and followed him. Sometimes the man took long strides that covered the ground quickly as he pursued a tortuous game track leading nowhere. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason he stopped and listened. Then with the same rapid stride he would abruptly turn and walk back.

Dakshi, noiseless and observant, dogged his steps without allowing himself to be seen unless the other took a wrong turning down one of the innumerable tracks that crossed the path leading back to the camp. Then, with a gentle touch on the arm, he said—

“Not that way, my son,” and put the wanderer on the right road.

Every few minutes the distraught man stopped and listened as the hunted stag listens, with widened eyes and distended nostrils, for the baying of the hound that is on his

heels. Then, seized by vague terror, he plunged blindly on in a headlong flight until he was arrested by the old man.

When the wild aimless wandering was ended he crept into the palm-leaf hut exhausted and worn out. Hathay, who watched for the return of the two, gave a sigh of relief. The snake-charmer laid himself across the entrance as the invalid disappeared inside the shelter, and the old woman massaged his legs until he fell asleep.

The tribe had encamped in a dry breezy glade in the forest above the bit of patana that held the waterhole. A small mountain stream babbled its way down through the jungle and crept out on to the patana. There it changed its character, and from a rocky torrent it became a silent stream with broken banks of black peaty soil.

The men of the tribe were still snake-hunting for John Smith. His payment of two rupees each in silver money was a great encouragement. More of the same kind of earning would enable the tribe to place sufficient money in the hands of the grain merchant to ensure a year's supply of millet, and a big drink at Maridi's wedding.

On a warm afternoon the men returned with their baskets; and a little group of women and children stood round the Gipsies as they displayed their catch. The snakes were turned out on to a slab of rock. The men carried sticks made of erukku wood, believed to have a subduing influence on the serpent tribe, and to prevent the snake from raising its head from the ground. A snake cannot strike unless it lifts itself above the object of its attack. With its head on the ground it is comparatively harmless. Of course, it may at any moment raise its head and strike the ankle or instep or even the calf of a man's leg.

There were three cobras and four tic polongas. All except one were young and admirably fitted for export. The seventh, a tic polonga, was faded in its markings and thick in its build. It was a vicious, evil-looking serpent, and it attracted more attention than all the rest.

"It is old and bad," pronounced Dakshi, who also carried an erukku stick, and was assisting in the herding of the snakes. "It must be released before sunset. Where was it taken?"

The spot was named; it was on the side of a rocky cliff

two thousand feet below the place where the Gipsies had pitched their camp.

"Put it back in its basket."

With a deft manipulation of the sticks the tic polonga was pushed under an inverted basket. A palm leaf was slipped underneath it, and the basket turned with a quick movement. The lid replaced the palm leaf, and the viper was secured. The rest of the snakes were recaptured, shut down, and the baskets piled outside the larger hut.

Hathay seated herself in a patch of sunlight, and the women and children gathered round her. There was still an hour of the afternoon left, an idle loafing hour with a tribe that did no regular work. They watched the departure of the man deputed to carry the old viper back to its rocky home. A snake charmer will never kill a snake if he can help it. He will hand it over to others to kill, or he will release it.

"Was it very old?" asked Maridi.

"Old as that tree," replied Hathay, indicating with a jerk of her head a giant keena that stood sentinel over the camp.

Maridi seated herself close to the old woman, loosened the grey hair and lifted it so that the breeze blew through it. She knew that the action would keep the old woman contented, and would dispose her to talk.

"Tell us about the tic polonga's death, old mother," said Maridi in a coaxing tone.

They knew her tales but were never tired of hearing them; the stories jogged her memory of the far past, and often added something new that had not been related before.

"When the good snake dies it seeks the place of death among the great rocks where the western sun, fierce and hot, dries all things to dust. The bones and skin lie there till the wind blows them away."

"But the tic polonga, the tic polonga! tell us about that!" cried the children, who had circled round her, sitting on their heels like a brood of young penguins.

Hathay made a gesture of disgust. "Bah! it is a bad snake full of evil. It knows that it is evil, for it only comes out by night."

"Because it cannot see by day, it can only hear," said Maridi, eager to take a part in the telling of the story.

"Maybe!" grunted Hathay, with contempt, as though the information given by the younger woman was not worthy of consideration. "The tic polonga lives many, many years. It is like the elephant and the forest tree in its great age. Before it dies its body grows fat, and its colour turns pale. From its side grow two wings with which it flies through the air. If its wings so much as brush a man with the softest touch he will die. When I was a girl——"

The children drew nearer, step by step, like birds, without rising. All the world over the interest grows keen when the old preface their tales with "When I was young."

"Ah! hah?" they cried, as they crowded round in their eagerness.

"When I was a girl there was a man belonging to our tribe; it was soon after we came from India to Zeilon (Ceylon), and he knew nothing of the wicked ways of the tic polonga. He was walking in the jungle. He passed a rock on which the sun shone full. An old tic polonga sitting on the rock heard his footsteps. It sprang into the air, and as it passed one of its wings grazed his neck. In less than an hour he was dead. We saw the mark where he was struck. It is true, my children. This old tic polonga that our men brought back to-day has its wings growing already beneath its skin. I could see them as it rested on the rock where the men turned it out of the basket. It could not use the wings because of the snakewood sticks the men held over it."

"Ayee! amah! I too saw the wings showing form beneath the skin!" said one of the women.

"It was well to send it back from whence it came, for it was near its end," continued Hathay.

"Huh! the death of the tic polonga is terrible indeed!" remarked Maridi.

"Tell us about it, ancient mother."

"When death comes near the tic polonga suffers great pain. It can no longer seek frogs and rats, for it grows too heavy to move. The pain is like fire burning its stomach to ashes. Then one day, just as the sun is about to pass behind the great rock to its cloud bed, there is a cracking rending sound." Hathay tried to imitate it by sending her

breath through her teeth, "and the skin splits from its head to its tail!"

Hathay stopped and looked round at her circle of listeners who with wide eyes and dropping jaws hung breathless upon her words. Hands were lifted to open mouths, and there was a chorus of "Ah! bah! aiyoh! huh!" She lifted her brown claw-like hand to mark each word.

"And from its vile body creep centipedes and scorpions in thousands."

"Dah! she has spoken a true word, the old grannie!" exclaimed one of the women. "My husband was walking far below the Sinhalese village where the ground is sand and prickly pear: and he found centipedes and scorpions all round him. They had crept beneath the rocks. Under every stone he turned was a scorpion, while on the prickly pear the many-legged worms ran up and down in hundreds. He wondered much how they came to be there till he saw the skin of a tic polonga lying near. It was pale in colour and very large and there were marks in its side where the wings had been."

"Did he see the bones?" asked one of the boys.

"The bones and flesh had all been eaten by the scorpions and the many-legged ones."

"And the wings?"

"They were lost in the jungle, and blown away by the wind."

There was a pause during which the horror of the tale was fully enjoyed. One of the women began to blow up the fire that she might warm some coffee for her husband. Hathay seemed to have forgotten her listeners and was half asleep.

"It is not so with the good snake, is it, Grannie?" said Maridi, giving the grey strands of hair a slight pull by way of a reminder.

"Gently, child, gently! No; the good snake lives under the protection of the gods, the swamis of the rock, of the trees and of the water."

"And it has the protection also of the greater gods," said the woman whose husband had seen the scorpions and centipedes.

"In India the Hindus build temples where they do

poojah to cobras. In Kandy also there is a temple where an old, old snake lives. It is fed with milk and attended by an old poojaree. They say that he was once of our tribe, but he has long since left his people."

"The gods have given the good snake many gifts," said the woman.

"Because it is good!" cried Maridi. "Did ever a cobra bite a blind man? No! not even if his foot pressed it through his blindness!"

"And because of its goodness," said the woman who had joined in, "it is easy to tame. In a few days after the taking of it, it can be made to sit up and move to the music of the pipes."

At that moment the peculiar wail of the gourd pipes of the old chief fell on their ears.

"Listen!" cried Hathay. "Hark how the old father is speaking to the good snakes brought in to-day. He makes sounds on his pipes which please their ears, and they are happy. Then he speaks to them in their own talk and tells them they have come where there is plenty of food and sunlight. They answer back that they like the jungle best. He replies that they must wait here for a while, and then if they are good he will send them to the land of rats and frogs. If they do not behave well—some of them are young and thoughtless like boys"—here Hathay allowed her glance to wander over the youthful portion of her audience; "the old father scolds, telling them that he will draw their poison fangs unless they are obedient, and will beat them with his snakewood stick. Then he shows them the naga-tali, the seed that is like the cobra with its hood spread and its poison teeth and its scales. The snake trembles before it and lowers its head. It knows then that it cannot bite because of the magic power of the naga-tali."

The old woman fumbled with the corner of her rag of a cloth, a garment that constituted dress, petticoat and bodice in one seamless robe, and displayed a naga-tali seed. Maridi did the same: and two or three of the children pointed proudly to grimy little packets tied round the arm above the elbow. Each packet contained among other highly prized charms one of the magic seeds to preserve the wearer from snake bite.

"Tell us more about the good snake, old mother," begged one of the girls. "No, no ! tell about the mukkan snake that ties itself into a knot !" cried others.

"Another time, another time !" mumbled grannie, who was tired of her story-telling, and thought that she had given them enough for the present. She lifted her hands and twisted her loosened hair into a knot. Then she rose and walked towards the large hut at the further end of the encampment. The children turned their attention to Maridi.

"Sister, tell us more about the cobra ; you know the tales as well as the old mother."

"Ah, hah ! then I must speak low ; but come with me into the jungle where the old mother will not hear me, and, lest she ask where we are going, dance, children, dance !"

She clapped her hands beating in regular time, and the children, naked to the waist, responded to the measure. They brought their arms against their sides with a hollow resounding slap not unlike the beating of a small tomtom. Their feet moved in unison, and they circled round each other dancing on their heels. At regular intervals they shouted in chorus and stamped on the ground.

Hathay at the entrance of the hut listened as they danced away like a brood of young fauns into the jungle, chanting in nasal tones a song of the seven-hooded cobra that was crowned for his good deeds by the gods. The quavering quarter-tones blended with the song of the wind through the trees, and the call of the green barbet by the stream, and the mocking cry of the monkeys at their afternoon meal of jungle-nuts and fruits.

"Is this where the good snake feeds at night ?" asked one of the boys, pausing at a place where the ground was damp.

"Perhaps if frogs abound," replied Maridi.

"How does it know if the frogs are there ?"

"The gods have given it a stone that it hides in its mouth. The stone gives light like the lamp-flies that live in the trees at the foot of the mountains. The stone is cast upon the ground, and by its light the snake sees the shining eyes of the rat and the glistening skin of the frog. When it has eaten, it gathers up the stone and hides it again in its cheek."

"Did you ever see the lamp of the good snake ?" asked a little girl.

"Once, and then I ran away as fast as I could."

"Tell us, big sister," pleaded the children.

"I was late in coming home from the jungle with my firewood. I had been far down the mountain-side where the Sinhalese woodcutters were felling trees. I went at a time when they had finished eating and were sleeping, as it was convenient that they should not see me. I moved swiftly, but with the silence of the jungle cat; and I gathered a big load, forgetting that my walk back to our camp would be up the mountain-side. Aiyoh! but it was long and tedious! Oftentimes I sat down to rest. When I reached the jungle where we had our huts it was quite dark. There was a strip of patana to cross where the snake might lurk because of the frogs. I beat the path with a piece of wood all the way along. The good snake I did not mind; but my blood turned to water as I thought of the tic polonga and the mukkan."

"And the mopila, sister, the blood-sucking mopila," said one of the small girls, cuddling close to Maridi.

"All at once my eye was pierced by a blue light upon the ground."

"A lamp-worm, sister?"

"It was too large for a lamp-worm. It was the good snake's light. I was frightened, for where the good snake feeds there also feeds other snakes. I ran and ran till I reached the huts. My whole body hurt with the pain of bearing my load and of travelling so fast. The old mother was pleased with the wood I brought. It was dry and had been put aside by one of the men for his own use. She gave me some curried fowl, and she rubbed my back and legs till she had drawn out the pain. Never again did I stay away till after dark, and with too heavy a load. Ayamah! but the forest is full of devils and snakes and big rats and spotted cats at night, and it is not safe to be far away from our men folk."

"Sometimes one may find bad insects and beasts in the forest by day as well as by night," remarked one of the bigger boys. "A few days ago I passed the bee rocks, and the bees came buzzing round me ready to sting."

"And did they hurt you, little brother?" asked another child.

The boy laughed confidently as he replied. "My father says that the bees only sting those who are afraid of them. I was not afraid. I stood quite still in the sunlight, never moving hand or foot. I was like one of the trees when the wind is asleep. The bees flew about me, watching like policemen, but they did not touch me."

"Is it good to stand quite still when the red ants drop from the trees?" asked a smaller boy.

"The ants are not like the bees. At all times they fight and sting and nip with their teeth and throw their poison about," replied the older boy, proud to be able to tell his story also. "The good snake made a mistake when it gave the ant some of its poison. One day a cobra was resting in the sun, and it saw a number of red ants trying to save their eggs from the stronger black ants. They fought and they fought. A black ant ran up to a red ant and placing a foot on the head of the red ant, which is smaller and weaker than the other, bit off its head. Quick as the dart of a spider out of its nest on a fly, the black ants dashed at the red, and the ground was covered with the bodies of the red ant. Now the good snake as it rested there was sorry. In the rains it sometimes takes shelter from the floods in the red ants' nest, and the door of the nest is never closed against the snake. Inside the nest it is warm and dry, and safe from the snake eagle. It did not like to see the kind-hearted little people being killed; and it called to them, saying: 'Come here, and I will give you something to fight your enemies with.' And to each it gave a tiny drop of poison. When the black ants came to nip off the heads of those who had received the great gift, the red ants turned round and shot out their tiny streams of poison. The poison entered the eyes of the black ants, and they were blinded. Those ants belonged to India, and the old mother heard the tale when she was a girl before she came to Zeilon."

"Ah, hah! one day I will go to India and see the mountains where the old grandfather was born," said another boy. "Sister, how many years is it since our tribe was in India?"

"Before you and I were born," replied Maridi. A distant cry fell on their ears. In a moment they were on their feet and alert to take cover. "Ah! it is only the old father's

son. The evil spirit has taken him and driven him forth into the jungle."

"Sister, how does the devil take him?"

Maridi, with no one to criticize or take the words out of her mouth, closely imitated Hathay in her manner of relating the traditions of the jungle tribes.

"It comes and sits upon his shoulder in the shape of a stinging beetle, and it rides up and down the forest, biting and scratching at his neck till he runs as I did at the sight of the good snake's light."

"Ah! those stinging beetles! My mother says they are very bad," remarked one of the girls.

"Come home, children," counselled Maridi. "The stinging beetles are devils that live in rocks and trees. As soon as the sun is behind the great rock they are loosed and fly where they will; but they return before it is day to continue their watch over the treasure that is placed under their care."

"What is a stinging beetle like?" asked one of the girls, as they walked soberly back to their shelters.

"Shuh! child! how should I know. I have never seen one. I do not want to be devil driven! There was a girl in another tribe who once had a stinging beetle on her. She was called out into the jungle by a jackal. Every evening as the sun went down the jackal came and cried, 'Come out! out! out! out!' Maridi imitated the cry of the jackal. "At last she could bear it no more. She crept under the talipot leaves of her mother's hut, and went to meet the jackal and to play with him. She must have passed near a spot where treasure was hidden, for a stinging beetle dropped down upon her and hid in her hair. When she went back to her mother's hut it was plain to be seen from the look in her eyes and the foolishness of her ways that she was possessed by a devil. No one thought about the stinging beetle and its hiding-place; but all knew that she had a devil somewhere about her."

"What did they do?"

"Her people beat her with sticks and burned her with hot charcoal. They put pepper in her eyes till she howled like a jackal. Still the devil would not leave her. Then they tied her to a tree in the jungle and left her."

“ And her end ? ”

“ The mopila snakes found her. Her body turned blue and that was how her people knew what killed her.”

“ And the stinging beetle ? Did the mopila snakes kill him too ? ” Children must have their details to the last word.

“ It went back to its treasure, where it still guards the hidden gold and silver, sapphires and rubies that it wants to keep from the hand of man. Now run, children, or we shall be late for the coffee.”

CHAPTER XIII

GAY said nothing of Geoffry's proposal. She had received no confidences from either of her companions whom she had not known many weeks, and was not inclined to give any herself. Possibly the same influence was at work with all three. Love at its first coming is new and sweet and wonderful. Its advent is a secret too precious to be spread abroad. A new self is developed which puzzles while it entrances. Whatever the man may feel about it, the woman is too jealous of her wonderful joy in the first rosy hours to share the knowledge of it with another.

With the man it is otherwise. His new sense of possession makes him ready and eager to claim before the whole world what has lately been given. The chivalry in him prompts him to let all men know of his good fortune and of his readiness to hold it against the rest of mankind. Like the thrush and the blackbird, the song of triumph is within him, although he may not voice it like the birds and beasts.

It was because Gay objected strongly to publicity that Geoffry consented to be silent. It would only be for a short time. When he returned from Kandy he would claim his right to come to the house as an accepted lover. Until then Gay might do as she pleased, hug her secret to her heart or confide it to whom she chose.

As he left the bungalow after dinner to walk home, Gay, impelled by a new force that seemed to have entered her being whether she willed it or no, followed Geoffrey down the steps and walked with him to the end of the garden path. When, fifteen minutes later, she hurried back wondering if she had been missed, she found the drawing-room empty. Helen had gone to bed. Catherine was in Betty's room making final preparations for the night.

Gay called Pedro, and told him to shut the house ; and learning that the master had retired to his room she sought her own with a feeling of relief that at last she was alone with opportunity to think over all that had taken place. Again and again she marvelled at the new joy that was thrilling through her veins. Again she went over the strange and unexpected happenings in the forest that she loved. It was all so wonderful, so beautiful, and thus thinking she fell asleep.

On the following day Nellie Campbell rode up to the house on her pony.

"Dad has been called down to Kandy on special constable duty," she announced in her abrupt way, as Gay ran out into the verandah to greet her. "I thought it would be a good opportunity to come and see you, Gay. Perhaps I can help with Betty."

"Thanks, she is better, and I am glad to say that the doctor has decided that it is not measles."

"Good ; but I've had measles myself, so I'm not nervous."

Nellie meanwhile dismounted, and at her direction the syce took off the saddle and deposited it in a corner of the verandah.

"I never let my saddle go to the stables," she explained. "It might be thrown down anyhow. Nothing like a broken saddle-tree to give a horse a sore back. Fasten that strap properly, syce, or the pony will have the jhool off. Put the nosebag with the saddle. I'll see the pony fed after you have marlshed it." She turned into the house and continued to Gay, "That old pony is as cunning as they make 'em, and his temper doesn't improve with age."

"I am so glad you were able to come ; you don't often get the chance, Nellie."

"I shouldn't have had it to-day but for father's absence. He and Geoffry Charnes and four more men left this morning early for Kandy ; and it is very uncertain when they will come back. It all depends upon how much trouble there is."

Gay recalled what Geoffry had said. It had almost slipped her mind in the more personal thoughts that had occupied her.

"Is it going to be serious ? " she asked.

"Dad says that the Sinhalese all over the island are full of disloyalty. It is not a thing of the moment. There is reason to believe that it has been going on for some time. So-called societies—Buddhist societies, debating clubs, social leagues, theosophist associations, even temperance leagues, call them what you will—have been got up with one end in view only; the propagation of disaffection. And now it is coming to a head."

"Who are the promoters?" asked Gay.

Nellie regarded her steadily for a space, and then her eyes sought the open window of the drawing-room through which she could see the garden blazing with colour under the brilliant sun. Beyond the garden the mountain reared its head, its ravines and shoulders mantled in a shimmering transparent haze of intense blue.

"If we could put our hands on these agents of disloyalty," said Nellie, after a pause, "the whole movement might be crushed in a week." Again she paused, as she brought back her wandering eyes to Gay.

"Who are they?" asked Gay, beginning to grow uneasy under Nellie's seriousness.

"Ask me another. They exist in every valley, in every district. There are men at work here, there, and everywhere, judging by results."

"Englishmen? surely not? that would be incredible."

"Europeans and natives. I won't call them Englishmen, though they may like to pose as such. It is suspected that they go round to the different meeting-places and give lectures to these clubs on the advertised subjects; but more than half the time is occupied with a secret propaganda of disaffection to the English Government. It is not always done from the platform. Very often the worst and most poisonous doctrines are put forward in whispers among the crowd before and after the meeting. The teaching is greedily swallowed and passed on in the native villages. Goodness only knows where it may all end."

"Not in a general rising," said Gay, with decision. She refused to be scared by what she termed in her mind old Campbell's grousings.

"We are only a handful of Europeans, after all, in the island," continued Nellie, who had been so long a kind of

wastepaper basket for her father's remarks on the subject when there was no one else to listen to him, that she had come to believe him a true prophet. "If the Sinhalese rise throughout the whole island, where shall we be? Thrown into the sea," concluded Nellie, gloomily.

"There is one thing against such a catastrophe. The Sinhalese have no leader," said Gay, with a determined effort to be cheerful. "You forget, too, that we have troops in Colombo."

"They can't be everywhere," replied Nellie, who was equally determined to face the music as she termed it. "I don't like losing all our planters from the district. As far as I can see, the only man left to us is Fred. Supposing the estate coolies give trouble, what then?"

"I've no fear of them unless their supplies run short, which is not likely. In such a case they will forsake the estate and bolt."

"There's another ugly feature about it which I don't like. Dad says that there are unlimited means behind the movement, sufficient to arm every Sinhali in the island. Where does the money come from?"

"Germany," replied Gay, promptly: "but it will all be spent in vain."

"I shall not say that if poor old Dad is killed. I think they might have let him off duty as a special constable."

"I understood that he volunteered. He is just the man who is needed to deal with the Sinhalese. If any one knows the native it is your father. You talk to Fred about it; he will tell you so."

At this moment a hurried step was heard coming up into the verandah. Gay went to the French window and found herself face to face with John Smith. His eyes shone, and he showed signs of excitement.

"Miss Goldenham, I'm awfully sorry to rush in upon you suddenly like this. I was passing by the stables on my way up to the Gipsy camp, and I saw a bay pony being badly treated by the syce. The man was kicking it. I can't bear to see animals ill-treated. He made me angry, and I went and laid my stick across his back then and there. If he's your man——"

"He's mine," said Nellie, who had joined Gay. "And

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the pony is mine. The pony bites, and I suppose the silly owl forgot to bring the muzzle which should be put on every time it is marlished."

"I'm sorry, but I couldn't help myself," said Smith, penitently.

"Now you're here, stop and have some lunch," said Gay, with the inbred hospitality of the colonist.

Smith accepted the invitation gratefully, and Gay went off to tell Pedro of the two additions to her party for lunch, a meal peculiar to Ceylon planting life that is called breakfast or tiffin according to fancy.

Nellie was left to entertain Smith. Polite small-talk was not one of her acquirements. She was no reader nor thinker. Her whole mind was given to the events of her daily life and of her neighbours' lives. She fixed an inquiring eye on Smith and asked—

"How is it that you have not gone down with the specials this morning?"

"Because I am not sworn in."

"Why not?"

"I refused. I pointed out that my business took me in all directions, and, therefore, I could not undertake to remain on my estate until I might happen to be wanted. Miss Campbell, get rid of that syce, he has a nasty temper."

"I will," replied Nellie. "He's afraid of the pony. By-the-bye, I'll go and see the pony fed now."

She was still wearing her sun hat. The words were no sooner spoken than she was acting on them, and was out in the garden hurrying towards the stables.

Smith hesitated; he listened for Gay's returning footsteps. She did not appear; and rather than be left alone in the drawing-room, he followed Nellie.

The pony was tied to a staple. Its ears moved restlessly and it struck the ground with its hind foot. Its temper was ruffled. At the sound of Nellie's footstep it whinnied. She spoke to it in a soothing voice, and the animal became quieter and more peaceably disposed. The syce was on the ground moaning in pain.

"You have given this man a good dressing down," observed Nellie, turning to Smith.

"Nothing more than he deserved," he replied hotly.

Then, addressing the man, he said: "Get up and finish your work; if ever I catch you ill-treating a dog or a horse again, I'll—I'll give you a double dose of what you have already had. Get up! I tell you! Get up and go and fetch the horse's food."

The man, terrified by the sight of the long walking staff that Smith carried, rose and limped off to do as he was bid. He was not as much hurt as he would have his mistress believe; and Smith knew that the exhibition of pain was put on to excite pity.

"That way trouble lies," remarked Nellie, in her confident tones. "My father never touches a servant nor a cooly. It is bound to land you in the police court sooner or later."

"I'm sorry," said Smith, as he watched Nellie handling the pony. "All the same I believe in the stick for the lower classes of human beings; and the brute roused my temper."

"He's a brute, perhaps; but he is a brute that needs handling just as much as the pony. The stick does no good with either the man or the animal."

The syce returned, and Nellie took the nosebag from him and hung it over the pony's head herself. The animal was hungry, and applied itself at once to the boiled gram, expressing its gratification with a purring snort.

"Go to the butler and ask him to give you some castor oil to rub yourself with," said Nellie to the syce. "I'll look after the pony."

Castor oil whether used as a lubricant or taken internally is a panacea for all ills in the opinion of the Tamil. The syce limped off to secure the dark evil-smelling product of the castor seed. At this moment Gay and her brother joined them. Fred began to talk to Nellie, while Smith, who was still feeling uncomfortable although none the less vindictive in his mind towards the object of his anger, turned away with a request to Gay that he might be allowed to see how her Neopolitan violets were progressing in their new frames.

"I can't grow violets, Miss Goldenham. You don't mind if I am very jealous," said Smith, as they walked towards the sheltered border on the east side of the bungalow.

"Be as jealous as you like, and I will show my forgiveness by presenting you with some more roots as soon as your frame is ready."

"You are kind!" murmured Smith, allowing a touch of sentiment to creep into his voice; but dropping back instantly into the purely friendly attitude that found favour in Gay's eyes. At the same time, walking a pace or two behind her, he saw no necessity to veil his expression. If Gay had been a pineapple and Smith a hungry schoolboy the expression on his face would have intimated that he intended to eat the pineapple and leave none of it for any other person.

Smith was not prepared, for several reasons, to propose marriage to any woman. If the lines of his life had been cast in the quiet backwaters of tea-planting, he would have left nothing undone to win Gay; but with this trading in wild animals and reptiles marriage was out of the question. At any moment he might have to go to New Guinea, Brazil, Japan or some remote country chosen by his employers. His small estate could be safely left to the care of a Burgher conductor for a few weeks or months; but a wife could not be so readily disposed of. Yet with the knowledge that he could not make the great venture, he was unable to keep away from the presence of the woman who held for him a strange attraction. And Gay, all unconscious of the mischief she might be working, was kind and friendly, anxious to give pleasure where it was possible and ready to do all in her power to make others happy; a fatal quality where it goes with a young and pretty face.

Meanwhile Helen, who had been in the garden with the children under the shade of the orange trees, came up as Gay was gathering her violets.

"Nellie Campbell is here. She is with Fred seeing her pony fed," said Gay, casually. "She and Mr. Smith are staying to tiffin. Look at these violets! I consider it a great triumph to grow such fine ones."

Smith agreed warmly, and began to search among the foliage. Gay held out a little bunch towards him.

"You won't find a single blossom left on the plants. We gather them closely, otherwise they would stop flowering."

He took the flowers with a word of thanks; but his

gratitude or rather his gratification was in his eyes where it was lost to Gay, but not to Helen.

"Did you say that Miss Campbell was at the stables?" asked Helen, carelessly. "I'll go and find her."

"Yes, do! and tell Fred that lunch will be ready in ten minutes. I'll round up the children for a toilet parade. Come and help me, Mr. Smith."

Gay went towards the bungalow where the boys and girls were already assembled under the ayahs' care. Helen looked after Gay and her companion, a vague wonder in her mind as to whether Gay understood what was in Smith's thoughts. Did she suspect anything, and if so, was the man distasteful to her—or otherwise? If Gay married, what would become of Fred?

Helen moved away towards the stables. The pony was still busy with its midday feed. Its ill-used syce squatted on his heels at a little distance. He was occupied in rubbing his arms, and as much of his back as he could reach with the precious oil he had obtained from Pedro. Fred and Nellie had disappeared.

Helen turned towards the kitchen garden and looked over the plumbago hedge. The people she sought were standing near a pergola that supported the rank growth of a chow-chow gourd which served as a vegetable marrow, when marrows were scarce. Fred talked earnestly; Nellie listened, her harebell blue eyes fixed intently on his, and a faint unusual colour flushing her cheek.

After one swift, keen glance Helen turned away. An odd pain gripped her heart, and she caught her breath in a little gasp. She plunged down an unfrequented garden path that led to the stream, a solitary corner of shrubbery where the abutilon, a bushy shrub, and the poinsettia grew shoulder to shoulder with some old unpruned tea bushes, left to become rank and wild for the sake of seed.

Why did she feel like this? What had come over her to upset her thus? she asked herself angrily. Fred and Nellie were very old friends. Why should they not walk together and speak to each other in private?

Helen had not yet heard that Oliver Campbell had been called to Kandy. She could not guess therefore, that Fred was listening to a repetition of the daughter's fears for her

father's safety, and her doubts as to the loyalty of the Indian coolies employed on her father's estate. Helen stood still, her eyes on the orange-coloured bells of the abutilon. Without seeing the delicate veined petals she looked into her heart and faced the situation. The hot blood rose to her cheeks and she bowed her head, covering her face with her hands.

"It's no use blinding myself to the fact," she cried in self-abandonment. "I love him! I love him! I love him!" She pulled herself together with an effort. "How can I be so foolish? I have no right to give myself away in this silly fashion. I was so happy with Noel! Poor Noel, how I loved him! I thought when he died that I should never love another man." She looked up above the flowering shrubs towards the great hill behind the bungalow, clothed with the forest Gay loved so dearly. "Fred is different. He is not like Noel, who was strong and irresistible, wilful and impetuous. Fred is so gentle, so dependent. He needs some one to love him and care for him. Gay is very kind and nice—but she doesn't understand!"

The lunch bell was ringing in the verandah. It echoed to the furthestmost corner of the garden. Still Helen did not move. She listened intently. The children ran with quick footsteps to the dining-room over the boarded passage, and they were followed by the ayahs and their servant Roderigues.

Gay and Smith, talking and laughing with voices raised because of the merry chatter round them, were close on the heels of the little people.

Then she heard Fred's voice, as he and Nellie approached with unhurried steps from the kitchen garden. They strolled under the rose pergola by the lawn on their way to the house. It seemed to the watcher that they lingered unnecessarily as they passed beneath the roses. What were they saying? Her quick ears caught the sound of a happy little laugh. It made her shiver.

Helen, moved by a sudden impulse, ran towards the bungalow and reached it just as Fred and Nellie mounted the steps. She heard Nellie say—

"How good you are, Fred! I feel ever so much happier."

They were a large and noisy party in the big dining-room with the children and the two guests. Nellie sat by Fred

at one end of the table ; and Smith was more than content to be beside Gay. To Helen and Catherine fell the task of looking after the hungry children. No sooner was the lunch ended than Smith rose, excusing himself on the score of a long journey.

"Where did you say you were going?" asked Fred, as he accompanied him to the verandah.

"Right over the ridge to the village on the other side, and possibly further," replied Smith, making no secret of his objective.

"That's Asseri's village, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think so," answered Smith, indifferently.

"I wonder if these men will give trouble. You know that the special constables have been called up?"

"Heard it this morning. It's a false alarm in my opinion, a Governmental mare's nest."

"I hope it may be so ; but I'm afraid mischief is brewing. It's German——"

Smith interrupted him with a strong expletive. He cursed the war and the enemy with a sudden outburst of fury, which made Fred smile as he recalled his companion's weakness in that respect.

"Look here," said Smith, cooling down as abruptly as he had flared up. "I may tell you between ourselves that it is nothing to me if the Sinhalese make riots. I have my trade to follow, and my contracts must be fulfilled. I heard this morning that Asseri's people have a couple of fine leopard cubs for me, and I want to get possession of them before the animals are weakened by neglect. They have to be carefully hand-fed with milk. I shall probably go down to the low country and take them with me to Colombo, where I shall see them safely shipped to their destination. I tell you this, Goldenham, in case you may hear men grouching because I am not losing my head over this will-o'-the-wisp of rioting which they seem to fear. I shall probably be seen to-morrow with a gang of coolies under my direction conveying two dozen venomous snakes, the two leopard cubs, some young monkeys——"

While Smith talked the two men walked towards the forest, passing the stables as they went. The pony had finished its gram. The nosebag lay upon the ground near

it ; and the syce sat hunched up against the stable wall with the sun shining down upon him. He scowled as he caught sight of Smith. The castor oil might have lubricated his blows, but it had not oiled his temper. Fred parted with Smith at the entrance of the forest.

"Good-bye ; you have a long tramp before you. I ought to have lent you our pony," said Goldenham, with sudden contrition for his want of thought for his guest. "It might have carried you to the top of the ridge."

"Thanks ; I should have brought my own if I had wanted to ride," replied Smith, as he strode away.

When tea was over Nellie called for her pony. It was brought by Gay's syce.

"Where's my man ?" she asked, as she held the pony while the syce fetched the saddle from the verandah.

Pedro came forward to explain. "That man feeling ill. Master give too much plenty beat."

"Where is he ?" demanded Nellie, looking sharply at the butler.

"I don't know, lady."

"Has he run away ?"

"Maybe, lady. I cannot say."

She mounted the pony from the verandah steps, refusing assistance from Fred.

"It will save me the trouble of dismissing him," said Nellie, in no way put out by the loss of her servant. "Good-bye, everybody. Good-bye, Fred. Come over and look round the tea factory to-morrow if you can. Dad will be pleased to think that you have kept an eye on things for him. Good-bye, Mrs. Loveden !" she added as she caught sight of Helen just entering the verandah.

Helen made no reply. She had heard the invitation given to Fred. Her lips closed more firmly than usual, and she turned quickly back into the bungalow. Never before had Nellie's cut-and-dried old-maidishness struck her so acutely as to-day. It positively got on her nerves. How Fred could see anything attractive in the girl Helen could not comprehend !

CHAPTER XIV

THE letters and daily newspaper arrived at Toona Kelli about midday by Goldenham's own messenger. The man was provided with a leather postbag of which the postmaster at the district office possessed a duplicate key. If the tappal cooly, as he was called, was not held up in any way by other business, he was expected to arrive at the bungalow before twelve; but if he had to deliver any letter by hand on his way down, and to wait for an answer, he would be late.

Fred, however, was impatient of any delay, and the carrier of the bag was rarely diverted from his path by any other business than that connected with the post. In addition to bringing back the letters, the cooly took away those that were intended for the post.

The day following Nellie's visit, Fred fulfilled his promise to go and look round her father's estate. He rode down, starting away from his bungalow as soon as he had seen his conductor and his tea-maker about the work to be done on his own land.

The pony, sure-footed and reliable, made no special demand on his attention; and as he rode he had opportunity for thought. A few words carelessly dropped by Smith troubled his mind. The longer he thought over them the more worried he became.

Fred was endowed with one of those simple natures that can think evil of no one. Being lame and somewhat of an invalid, he led a more or less sheltered life and could not be said to run with other men. It thus happened that he heard less gossip and perhaps knew less of his neighbours' mode of living than others.

He was not without his faults, but they were not of the flagrant type. Occasionally he lost his temper with his coolies. The natives were irritating; the sun, which has

much to answer for in the East, was hot ; and he was tired. In his exasperation he let fly a few expressions that he would not have liked his sister to overhear.

Beyond a swear round now and then, Fred led a blameless life, as blameless as Gay herself ; although, as far as a knowledge of humanity went, he was not as ignorant as his sister.

It was inevitable that certain information should come to his ears concerning the deeds of his neighbours which did not reach Gay's. He scrupulously avoided showing any interest in such subjects, and was not at all grateful to any busybody who took upon himself to pass on a scandal.

If men chose to have bachelor parties on birthdays and consume more wine than was good for them, it was clearly no affair of his. He was never present at any orgy of the kind, and he took care that nothing of the sort happened under his own roof. If irregularities were forced upon his notice, he avoided personal contact with the ill-doer as much as possible : and he gave him no encouragement to come to his house. He left those whose moral standard was not the same as his own to go their ways as they pleased.

Like all men so constituted, Fred was slow to believe evil of any one ; but when once suspicion was roused he found it difficult to rid his mind of it. Where another man would have dismissed the tale with the comment, "Silly ass !" Fred worried over the fact that he had not thought the man could be so weak, and that now he would have to reconstruct his ideas and place so-and-so in another mental category.

Fred had heard nothing derogatory of John Smith's character. He regarded him as a man like himself, well-intentioned and honourable. Therefore, what Smith had to say carried weight.

Before parting at the entrance of the forest on the previous day Smith reverted to the subject of the special constables' work.

"I hope you don't think me a slacker, Goldenham," he said, more temperately than when he had spoken a short time previously at the mention of the special constables' duty.

"Not at all ! not at all !" Fred hastened to say. He was the last man to wish it to be thought that he sat in judgment on his fellow-men. "You know your own business best ; and I am sure that you are quite right not to take on

any job that you don't see your way to carry through satisfactorily. I should do exactly the same myself."

"Of course I am fitted for it; I should not hold back on account of any risk to life and limb."

"Will there be any risk?" asked Fred, who had no faith in serious rioting. He believed that the mixed nationalities in the island would not have enough cohesion to be able to band themselves in opposition to a beneficent Government from whom they received nothing but good.

"No risk whatever, in my opinion," answered Smith, confidently. "I've said all along that there's nothing in all these rumours of a rising on the part of the Sinhalese. What have they got to rise against? If, however, the natives do come to blows with the police, a planter may by chance be done in by a blow from a rice-pounder. Anyway, I hope, whoever he may be, he will have made arrangements to meet his liabilities. You remember Brown's case when he died of typhoid fever, and how the hat went round. You gave a hundred rupees yourself; so did I and a good many other fellows. His father, who inherited the whole of the estate, wouldn't contribute a shilling; and no one could make him because the poor woman and her children had no legal claim on Brown. If we, his friends and acquaintances, felt a moral claim and were ready to help, surely old Brown should have felt it doubly strong."

"It certainly was rough on the woman, poor soul!" said Fred, who shrank from the subject with his usual reserve.

"What I mean to say is this," continued Smith, who seemed to have forgotten that he was in a hurry. "A short will and a few words to the executors will be all that is necessary. If Brown had left written instructions they would have been sufficient. His father couldn't have disregarded them. After all, it takes so little to provide for these unfortunate families; and old Brown would not have missed the money. By-the-bye, I hope Charnes has made a will. I hope with all my heart that he and the rest of the crowd who have gone down to Kandy and Colombo will not forget! Eh! What?"

"I don't know," replied Fred, after a perceptible pause. "I know nothing of Charnes' private affairs."

He spoke in such a tone as to suggest that they might

both be going a little beyond their province in discussing their neighbours' business. It was not lost on Smith. He pulled himself up, and said hastily :—

“Oh! well! we have no right to interfere or ask any questions. Yet what is to prevent a repetition of Brown's case if some of these men get knocked on the head and have forgotten to make proper provision? I suppose the hat will have to go round again. So, indirectly, it is our business since we are the people who are expected to contribute.”

Fred was silent again. He wished with all his heart that his gossiping friend would depart. Smith saw that the subject was distasteful, and tried to amend what he had said; but, unfortunately, he only plunged the deeper.

“But Charnes isn't killed yet. He is a strong hefty fellow in the prime of life, and he will probably be able to take care of himself. He will live to perform all his duties sooner or later without coming to us for help. So long! I must be off.”

Smith strode away without waiting for comment on his words. Perhaps he did not wish to be asked for the grounds of his observations. He need not have feared any cross-questioning. Goldenham was not a man to go behind a friend's back. If it became necessary to obtain certain information concerning a man's life, he would prefer to go straight to the fountain head and have it at first hand.

With his habitual disbelief in evil until evil was proved, Goldenham indignantly repudiated the thoughts that arose from the pernicious insinuation. He had hitherto believed whole-heartedly in his old friend's integrity. Through all the length of years that they had been living in close proximity, never a breath of scandal had dimmed Geoffry's record in fair dealing as a planter and as an upright honourable gentleman in his mode of life.

Goldenham was aware that among the majority of Europeans in the island, a scrupulous reserve was maintained about all matters connected with the private lives of the colonists. He was surprised and annoyed at the breach of the unwritten custom made by Smith. As long as a man conformed to social conventions and was sober in public, he was accepted at that valuation and counted as sober no matter how he might behave in the lonely privacy of his

own bungalow. An acquaintance who went out of the way in idle curiosity to discover secrets that did not concern him was looked upon as a traitor in the camp.

Fred was inclined to regard Smith in this light. He was not only upset by the indirect insinuation, but he was also moved to a dull resentment against him for trying to undermine his faith in an old friend and implant the seeds of a horrible distrust. He did his best to shake off the suspicion ; to "turn it down" as incredible ; but the monster—a hydra-headed scandal—once created is not so easily slain. It has too many heads. As often as it is scotched, it springs to life again, no matter what the weapon used against it—ridicule, indignation, an appeal to reason. It is a psychic reptile more difficult to destroy than any serpent in the physical world.

What did he, Fred, really know of Charnes' private life ?

In his many visits to his friend's bungalow he had never been beyond the dining and drawing-rooms and the smoking-hall which Geoffry used as his sitting-room.

"Curse that fellow Smith !" said Fred to himself, as he rode towards Campbell's estate.

On his way he had to pass Wanna Wella. It lay on the slopes of the valley opposite to his own place with the river between. The bungalow stood halfway up the hill, a pretty oasis of flowers and variegated shrubs in an expanse of verdant tea. The eastern sun caught the spot and lighted up the tints of the purple bougainvillier, the blue ipomea, the flaming orange bignonia, and the brilliant scarlet poinsettia. It looked a delectable home for any Englishman, sweet, wholesome, and alluring in its subtropical beauty.

"Curse that fellow Smith ! I didn't know he was such a scandal-monger," said Fred, as he left the bungalow behind.

As long as his eyes rested on Geoffry's charming home, the thought of its owner being in any way a "wrong 'un" was easily rejected ; but when the bungalow was lost sight of, suspicion sprang up once more and suggested that the most beautiful ferns and moss often hid the foulest of swamps and most poisonous of snakes, the most loathsome slugs and worms. Appearances were not to be trusted.

"Oh ! hang that fellow Smith ! He's a liar !" cried

Fred aloud, in his distress, as he realized his own deplorable disloyalty to his old friend.

The syce heard his master speak and hurried up to his stirrup to take the order which he supposed his master was giving.

"What? Yes! Run on ahead and tell Miss Campbell that I am coming."

The syce left the path and took a cooly track through the tea, a short cut to Campbell's bungalow. Fred was relieved to be alone even though the anathemas he occasionally breathed against Smith were unintelligible to his servant.

"I can't, I won't believe that there is anything wrong about old Geoff. It's preposterous! its ludicrous! it's outrageous!" he said, as he once more ranged himself on Charnes' side. "Smith ought to be shot for hinting such a thing."

Then Fred asked himself what the blighter actually said. To his surprise he could not recall the exact words. "Charnes ought to make his will." That was all right. Everybody ought to do so. He himself had made a will.

Then Smith had added something to the effect that Charnes ought to provide for his liabilities and not leave them, like the unfortunate Brown, to be dependent on the charity of other people.

No! Smith had not said that; he had not mentioned liabilities in Geoffry's case, but only in Brown's. Then, what the devil had he said?

He had implied something, a vague something in connection with liabilities that necessitated the making a provision of some kind.

Again Fred doubted. Had Smith said as much even as that? Or was it his own thought born of the association of ideas?

Honest Fred Goldenham sustained a distinct shock as he realized his disloyalty to his friend. Why should he suspect Charnes of following in the footsteps of Brown because Smith happened to mention the names of the two men in one breath?

"Oh! the devil take Smith!" he exclaimed, as he pulled the pony up before the front verandah of Nellie's house;

only he made the sentence just a little stronger in his deep annoyance than is here recorded.

"Very good, sah!" replied the syce, as he held the stirrup for his master to dismount.

The man knew very little English, and had not understood. He took it for granted that an order had been given. If it was not fulfilled the order would be repeated. Probably it was only a direction to perform one of his duties as horse-keeper which he had no intention of leaving undone.

Nellie, hearing that Fred was on the way and close at hand, had run out into the verandah to be ready to welcome him. She had a colour in her cheeks, due to the pleasure she felt at seeing her visitor; and her blue eyes shone as she greeted him. She wore a pale blue linen frock and sunbonnet; and she reminded Fred of a fresh English harebell blossoming on some breezy heath in the old country.

"How good of you to come, Fred! The conductor is here, and he will tell you what the coolies are doing. After you have spoken to him, we will go down to the tea-house, where the last break of tea is being fired."

The interview with the conductor proved satisfactory, as also was the visit to the tea-house. The tea-maker showed him what had been done and the work intended for the morrow; and Fred expressed his approval and promised to look in at the same time the following day. Nellie was also gratified to know that all was going well.

"Now come and see the garden," she said.

She showed him the piece of ground that she coveted for her fowls. Fred looked closely at it and pointed out that the tea bushes were some of the best on the estate; it would be wrong to sacrifice them in these hard times. He examined the ground and suggested an extension of the fowl-run in another direction. By slicing off a piece of the garden shrubbery that had grown rank and wild, she might get just the space she wanted for her cocks and hens. He called the gardener and gave the necessary orders; the man was to begin the work at once, so as to get it cleared away before the master returned. Campbell cared very little for the garden, so little that he would never consent to any addition to it. There it was, and Nellie might do what she liked with it, except enlarge it.

After arranging for the new fowl-run, Fred and Nellie went to the office. He advised her on the reply she ought to give to a business note that had come for her father marked "urgent." As Fred talked and gave advice, it occurred to him more than once that Nellie was exceptionally level-headed over estate matters, and he complimented her on her business capacity. She coloured with pleasure at his words of praise.

"I am my father's clerk," she explained. "I find I can save him a great deal by writing his letters at his dictation as he lies in his long-armed chair with his tired old legs at rest. I can also keep the estate accounts."

"It's a wonderful help to have someone who understands this office work. I come in dog-tired after being up at five in the morning doing roll-call. Then I tramp over the estate to see that the weeders and pruners and pluckers are doing their work properly. Then to the tea-house to look after the fermenting, the withering, and the firing. By the time I get back to the bungalow and have had my bath and breakfast, I am more fit for the armchair than the office stool."

"That's exactly what father says. I like the work, and I never seem to get tired."

So they chatted, and the morning hours flew by till Fred suddenly discovered that he had only just time to get home to the late breakfast. Gay always waited for him. Often it was nearer twelve o'clock than eleven when they sat down. Gay had a reason for waiting. It left her brother under an obligation to return in good time, and not overwork himself. Moreover, he made a better meal when he had company than when he took his food alone.

Breakfast was just over and the children dismissed, when Pedro brought in the postbag. He laid it on the table in front of his master. Fred opened it with a little brass key attached to his watch-chain. Gay possessed a similar key, but it was only used when Fred was away.

He distributed the letters without haste. Helen and Catherine received theirs and rose from their seats at once, to retire to their rooms to read and if necessary reply to them.

The last to be brought out by his unhurrying fingers was for Gay. It was a thick envelope, and it was addressed in

Geoffry's handwriting. Fred was not in the habit of showing any curiosity over his sister's correspondence, nor any desire to see it, unless she gave him a letter from a mutual friend to read knowing that he would be interested. She was equally indifferent regarding his correspondents, asking no questions, and showing no desire to know their names or their business. He therefore handed her the letter in silence.

She took it, and he could not help seeing the little gleam of glad surprise that shone in her tell-tale eyes. They smiled with pleasure, although the lips did not curve in sympathy. Instead of opening it Gay slipped the letter into her pocket and began to busy herself with the breakfast table. She touched the bell to summon Pedro to clear away, and she began to collect the flower vases. They had to be rearranged every morning. Usually she attended to them before breakfast, but to-day she had had no opportunity. The morning had gone quite as quickly with her as with Fred over various little duties for the children.

Fred gathered up his letters and the newspaper and rose from his seat. It was his custom to retire to his sitting-room which also served as office, and remain there till three o'clock when tea was brought in to him on a separate tray. After his correspondence and estate books were written up, he took forty minutes' sleep.

At half-past three the sun had lost its midday fierceness, and he was ready to visit parts of the estate that he was unable to reach in the morning.

To-day he stood at the end of the table, his chair pushed back, and looked at his sister. He shrank from asking any questions; yet he found himself desperately anxious to know what Geoffry could possibly be writing about at such length, as the bulky envelope suggested, to Gay. Her manner was not encouraging.

"I see you have a letter from Geoff," he said diffidently. "When you have read it do tell me how he is getting on; and whether the political atmosphere is much disturbed in and round Kandy."

"I will," replied Gay, bustling about as she put the vases on a large tray.

"I wonder where he is staying?"

"He said he was going to the Queen's Hotel."

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Still Fred lingered. His sister's manner told him nothing. He had seen her similarly occupied on other days. There was no sign of haste in her movements ; nor of self-consciousness. What could Charnes have to say to Gay ?

" Perhaps he wants me to give a look round at Wanna Wella."

" It would be kind of you to do so, whether he asks it or not," replied Gay.

Fred demurred. If secrets did by any chance exist behind the bungalow, it would be torture to him to run up against them. The thought was another of the morning's pin-pricks, and he hated himself for that " If."

" No ; I don't think I can go unasked," said Fred, after a slight pause.

Gay began to lift the flowers of yesterday from the vases, and to pack them in her empty basket. The vases she refilled with fresh water.

" By-the-bye, how did you find Nellie this morning ? " she asked.

Fred replied, and they talked for a few minutes of the new fowl-run, and of Nellie's joy at finding that it was possible to make the extension without sacrificing the tea bushes. Then Gay put on her gardening gloves—for the roses in Ceylon are rank and thorny in growth—and picked up her scissors. As she turned to go out through the long French window, Fred looked after her with the words on his lips that he shrank from speaking.

If—another cursed " if "—Geoffrey was *that* sort of man, then the less Gay had to do with him the better.

" *That* sort of man ! " What sort of a man ? Confound it ! Here he was up against the old suspicion in its full strength, and with nothing more to support it but Smith's vague insinuation and his own disloyal thoughts.

In fierce displeasure at himself, at Smith, at Charnes, and now at Gay for having received a letter, he strode off feeling half a martyr and half a criminal.

He ran against Helen in the passage. She was taking a troop of joyous little people into a shady corner of the big verandah to read a story to them. Some of them would fall asleep in the middle of it ; so much the better.

" I shall be going to the furthest end of the estate this

afternoon, Mrs. Loveden. It is where the river comes out of the jungle. You have often said you would like to see it ; will you come ? ” said Fred, feeling that he could not stand a solitary walk with his own thoughts.

“ I shall be delighted,” said Helen, the colour flying into her face unknown to herself.

“ We will start at four. Be sure you have some tea before going as we shall not be back until six ; possibly later.”

He had no intention of confiding his misgivings to Helen. He only wanted to protect himself against thinking round in a pernicious circle, and increasing his own distrust, which he knew to be utterly unworthy of himself.

CHAPTER XV

THERE are epoch-making events in all our lives. The events mean nothing to the rest of the world: but they are often pivots on which the private life of the individual turns. They go to the forming of character; they strengthen or weaken it according to the new influences that are brought to bear upon it.

A boy's first day at a public school is one of them. A girl's last day is equally momentous. She throws off the shackles of the old discipline—of appropriating each hour of the day to a regular employment—and starts out on a new life, where her time is at her own disposal to be used or wasted as she pleases. A man's entry on the duties of his profession and its many responsibilities is a highly important crisis when his foot is on the threshold of failure or success.

A woman's first love-letter, although of no consequence to any one but herself, is the entry for her into a new world. She is taking into her life a dominant influence that may have a far-reaching effect.

The first kiss of her lover is bewildering; but it is a thing of the moment. It resolves itself into nothing but a memory as soon as she is alone, a dream of bliss that melts away under the prosaic duties of her daily life.

The love-letter has more substance. There is nothing of the dream about it. It is permanent and abiding. There lie the words of the beloved in black-and-white, incontrovertible, enduring as long as the paper will endure that records them.

As to whether the sentiment that inspires the writer will remain is another matter with which the happy recipient does not concern herself. When love first comes it always means that it is going to endure for ever, whether

it is expressed in kisses or in written words. By the time a woman receives her first letter she has probably experienced the kisses, and she holds against her heart the permanent assurance that they meant all or even more than they implied.

There is another feature common to all love-letters. On receipt of the priceless treasure, a girl, if she is in the presence of her family or friends, puts the document away into some safe place—her pocket for choice—until she has an opportunity of reading it in solitude. The knowledge that it is there thrills her. The letter seems invested with a magical power. It is like the stolen peach secreted by the schoolboy. She waits for a luxurious moment to enjoy it, when nothing is likely to interrupt that enjoyment or to give away the secret.

Gay was no different from the rest of the world. The peach was in her possession, although she had not come by it dishonestly like the schoolboy. She could afford to wait for the luxurious moment. Her morning duties must be completed before she could indulge in any selfish pleasure. If she had known that Geoffry was going to write so soon after his arrival in Kandy, she would have arranged the flowers before breakfast instead of playing games with the children in the garden by way of making them take exercise.

As it was the vases must be filled; and when they were done she might hope to have an hour to herself free from interruptions. She worked quickly, and in less than thirty minutes—the time she usually allowed herself for her task—the vases were in their places and the air of the house rich with the perfume of roses, violets, and lilies.

She took off her apron and gloves and put away scissors and basket. Where should she go to find a secluded spot free from demands on her attention? Her thoughts turned to the forest. All her best moments had been spent in the company of her beloved trees. It was a fitting spot for reading Geoffry's words. The forest would hide her from the distracting world of the bungalow. She felt that the great giants were already beckoning to her with a promise of the sympathetic solitude for which she craved.

Gay moved down the passage to her room. She was met by Nurse Catherine, who carried a basket.

"You asked me for some needlework, Gay. Here are some socks belonging to the children. How they wear them into such holes I can't think!"

"Dear little restless feet; I am not surprised," replied Gay, as she took the basket. "I've earned an hour's rest, and I'll darn while I rest."

She was about to enter her room to put on her sun-hat when Fred drifted up the passage in quest of a book that he had been reading the previous evening.

"It is in the drawing-room on the little table by the fireplace, where you left it last night," said Gay.

"Thanks; I thought that it might be there." Instead of passing on to fetch it, Fred stood still as though a sudden thought had struck him. "By-the-bye, Gay, was there any message for me in Geoff's letter?"

"I haven't opened it yet. I thought I would finish the flower vases first. I'll let you know at teatime."

Catherine, who was still with Gay, glanced at her face, but read nothing unusual. Fred went on his way, and his sister opened the door leading into her bedroom.

"May I speak to you, Gay? I won't keep you a minute," said Catherine, detaining her. "One of the letters I received this morning was from Dr. Caversham. He asks me to let him know how Betty is, and says that he will be up in this direction to-morrow."

"Please tell him that we shall be delighted to see him, and that my brother and I hope that he will stay to dinner," answered Gay, with warm hospitality. She moved forward into her room as though the subject were at an end as far as the Doctor was concerned. Catherine glanced after her, strongly tempted to follow. A quiet talk with Gay would have been very acceptable after receiving Caversham's long epistle. However, failing encouragement, Catherine retired; and Gay, who had her own thoughts to occupy her, did not see what was in the mind of the other.

The next hindrance was Pedro, who had a complaint to make against the beef-box cooly and the length of time he took to bring the supplies back from market, an entirely false charge if his mistress could only have known it.

This was a matter that could not be disposed of as easily as Dr. Caversham's visit. Not only was Gay obliged

to hear the rambling tale of shortcomings, but she had to interview the defaulter. She reproved; Pedro added abuse in his native tongue; and the cooly was made to understand that he would be "put sick," or, in other words, fined, if he did not speedily mend his ways.

He accepted it all with resignation; it was the will of the gods. His real offence was the loss of a small piece of mutton sent as a present to Pedro by the butcher. The mutton had been unaccountably lost as the man passed his own house on the way back.

Gay heard Billy's voice clamouring for her as she was leaving the back verandah. She sent Pedro for her basket of socks and her workbag. As soon as he returned she slipped out into the garden and sped away swiftly towards the forest.

Surely no place could be better chosen for the reading of her first love letter—she never doubted its nature—than the place where he had declared his love, and she had received the first kiss in her life that mattered.

The sun was hot, but there was plenty of shade. Once hidden from the bungalow by the turn in the path, she had no fear of pursuit. She was not only out of sight of the house, but she was too far off to hear any call from the children. Much as she loved them, the little people were not conducive to a mood in which a love-letter could be appreciated and enjoyed.

She reached the spot where she and Geoffry had sat. The prostrate old tree, with its great limbs as large in themselves as the ordinary English tree of the hedgerow, seemed to give her an invitation to stop. She seated herself on the bough in the same spot, and placed her basket of needle-work by her side. It was earlier in the day than when she and Geoffry were there. The birds were silent and still drowsy with their midday rest during the hottest part of the tropical day. The butterflies basked in the sun with wide-spread wings, too lazy to seek the open flower.

She took the letter from her pocket and gazed at it. She knew the handwriting as well as she knew Fred's. Geoff had occasionally written in days gone by when he sent her boxes of chocolate and baskets of mangosteens. She was in her flapperhood then. Later the letters had come in answer to her own, asking him to dinner or lunch.

As she looked at the envelope before opening it, the writing seemed different. The hand that wrote was the hand that had caressed her hair and thrilled her with a soft lingering touch. Its association with the letter brought him very close.

"Dear old Geoff! I didn't know that I loved you so!" she whispered in her heart.

She opened the envelope and drew out the folded sheets—one, two, three—all closely written. What a lot he had to say, and how dear of him to say it! Had he guessed how she would crave for the written words when she could no longer hear them spoken?

The letter began, "Dear little Chum." It was the old style of address that had accompanied the chocolate and the fruit, and which he equally used when he accepted her invitations. Somehow, like the address on the envelope, it took a different meaning and sent a strange new thrill through her.

She read on, and his hot words carried her away. They lifted her into a wonderful world of love. She felt her heart respond and rise to meet him. She was no longer afraid to admit that she loved him. Oh, it was all so new, so delicious!

"Darling Geoffry! What a stupid, blind little bat I have been not to see it before! Of course we have loved each other all the way along. Oh, Geoff! Why didn't you open my eyes before? Think of the time we have wasted!"

She read the words again and again. He repeated in a straightforward manly way what he had told her as she leaned against him here in this very spot, vowing as she listened that she would not be engaged.

She was thankful that he did not allude to this piece of childishness on her part. What a baby he must have thought her! She had talked like a girl of ten instead of a woman of over twenty. It was of himself that he spoke in his letter, with never a doubt of the glorious future that was before them.

When she had read through to the end, blushing faintly at the warm words with which he concluded, she sat motionless as if under some enchantment. Her eyes rested on the green of the forest and the blue of the sky, but her mind

had drifted far beyond the beauty and colour of nature. The basket of work was forgotten. Gay, the practical, the busy housewife, the foster-mother of the children she had gathered under her wing, was day-dreaming. Love in the forest held her under its spell.

The letter remained open in her hand to read yet again, more slowly than before. Her eyes dwelt on the pages, lingering here and there to feast on certain sentences that were to remain for ever engraved on her memory. The minutes passed without her knowledge. The life of the forest stirred with its afternoon activities. The breeze rustled the foliage above. Far away the wild monkeys, roused from their midday lethargy, chattered and squabbled as they hunted for their food, the jungle nut, the sour-sweet fruit, and the fat grub.

Suddenly the psychic calm of her mind was broken. Her dream of love snapped like a large iridescent bubble that bursts. Something foreign to her thought had entered her world and changed its atmosphere. Though the sun was still shining, and the face of nature had not altered, she had a sensation of losing the glitter and gold out of the daylight.

She lifted her eyes from the pages of Geoff's letter and met a sight that held her in mute astonishment.

Within ten yards of the spot where she sat stood a man intently staring at her. He was an Englishman, as white of skin as herself. His dress was a strange mixture of East and West. A pair of old khaki breeches and some improvised puttees, made of Hessian torn from the withering shelves of a tea-house, clothed his legs. He wore a short coat of native make, such as the headman of a Sinhalese village might have been seen in, and an old grey flannel shirt, collarless and open at the neck. His hair, long and untrimmed, was covered with a much-worn black velvet cap such as the Goanese servants affect in Ceylon.

It was not his strange kit, however, that held Gay's gaze; it was his face. He possessed only one eye. The socket of the other was empty, painfully, repulsively empty.

A brown ragged beard hid his mouth and chin; but every other feature was lost to Gay in the contemplation of the mutilated eyes. The expression in the one remaining

eye riveted her attention. In colour of a cloudy hazel, it held within it the horror of some ghastly experience, some unnatural deed that had roused a terror never to be forgotten.

For her own safety Gay felt no alarm; she was too much surprised for fear. Moreover the colour of his skin revealed his Western origin, and in the East all white folk feel the brotherhood of nationality.

The man remained standing on the edge of the forest through which he had approached. If he had come by the path she would have seen him advancing. He must have emerged from the leafy shadows with the stealthy movements of the wild animal of the jungle.

A great tree-trunk was immediately behind him. How he had managed to pass through the dense vegetation without using the path she did not know. Like one of the forest beasts he must have wormed his way along an unknown game track.

She wondered how long he had been there watching her from behind his leafy screen. She was familiar with the presence of the deer and jungle pig, the jackal and rat, the snake and the lizard, and even with the wandering Gipsy and the Sinhali woodcutter. They belonged to the forest; but this strange European was alien to it. There was reason for the presence of the animals and the natives; but there was no reason that she could see for a European to be playing the gipsy and haunting the forest as if he had been born there.

As the two gazed at each other, he read astonishment in her eyes, while she detected suspicion and distrust in that single eye. It was evident that though she had never seen him before he was familiar with the sight of an English-woman.

"Who are you?" Gay asked abruptly, as soon as she could find her voice.

He started violently at the sound, and sprang back towards the tree as if to take cover behind it. He made no reply except to catch his breath in a slight gasp.

Suddenly the thought flashed through her brain that this was Billy's geegee! The child had told the truth. His geegee had only one eye. The stranger must have

discovered the boy wandering up the forest path and have carried him to the elephant rocks. This, too, was the writer of the message found in Billy's pocket; the call that had taken Gay to the rocks on the day following the child's escapade. Who could he be? What did he want? And why had he that hunted, furtive expression?

Noticing that he had started at the sound of her voice, she kept silent. Her long and intimate association with the forest had taught her that all its creatures were shy and timid, and easily took alarm at sudden and abrupt movements; a strange noise caused the hardiest of birds, beasts, and reptiles to dart away and seek cover.

Lowering her eyes Gay began to fold up the sheets she still held in her hands. She replaced them with slow gentle movements in their envelope and slipped the letter back in her pocket.

The confidence of the stranger returned, and he resumed his old position, still keeping a watch on every action. Her hand went out to her basket with the same precaution. She picked out a sock. It belonged to the restless Billy; its heel had a big hole in it.

With careful deliberation she chose a darning needle and threaded it with some wool. Her action seemed to give him confidence. He advanced a foot or two nearer to the path, as though the sight of an Englishwoman darning a child's sock was familiar and attractive. Still Gay did not venture to speak again. She hunted in her work-bag for a thimble, and began to darn.

After a few minutes of industrious work she thought she might venture to make a remark. This time it should not be of the nature of a question such as she had fired at him in her surprise when she had first spoken.

"You—er—you sent a message by the child," she said slowly and softly, keeping her eyes upon the rapidly diminishing hole. "I came to the elephant rocks as you asked, but you were not there."

"It was impossible. I was being watched. I was afraid of being captured," he replied jerkily.

"Indeed! But who would want to capture you in Ceylon? This is a free colony, and we white people are all friends here. Were you afraid of the police?"

"No, no!" he replied in breathless haste. "No; the police might help me—if they could—but the enemy is stronger than the police. It is from the enemy that I want to escape."

He turned his head to the right and to the left and listened intently.

"Poor fellow!" thought Gay, as she drew her wool across and across the hole. "He is some poor distraught lunny who has escaped from custody."

Again there was silence, during which Gay wondered what she ought to do. Clearly the man should not be at large in the jungle. Even if he was harmless, the climate and exposure in the forest was dangerous to his health and his life.

"Why did you send the message? Is there anything we can do for you?" she asked presently.

"Can you—will you give me some quinine?"

"Quinine!" repeated Gay, in surprise. "With pleasure; but I have none here with me. I will bring some this evening or to-morrow morning—any time you like."

"To-morrow afternoon at the edge of the patana, where the path branches off to the elephant rocks. Will this time of the day suit you?"

He made short pauses in his speech, during which he listened intently, glancing round as though he expected some one to spring suddenly upon him. Gay noticed the signs of nervousness, and her pity was roused.

"All right," she said. "At this time to-morrow I will be there, somewhere near the waterhole."

The man looked up at the sky. "We shall have showers before long, and next month the monsoon will break."

"A planter," thought Gay; "and one who has lived in the island. Who can he be?"

"I shall ride up; the patana is too far for me to walk," she remarked aloud.

"For God's sake don't bring your syce! He may be in the pay of those torturing devils. Come alone, and let no one know you are coming," he said, with a quickening of the breath.

"Very well; I will do exactly as you wish, and will

come alone. Is there anything more you would like me to bring ? ” asked Gay.

Her voice and manner were calculated to inspire confidence. It was in this way that she drew shy children to her and made them her devoted followers. She was not sure if he heard her. His mentality was so shaken by some shock to the nerves, that, like a simple animal, he could only consider one thing at a time. Just now his attention was drawn to a distant sound that came from a ravine. His head was turned in its direction as he listened intently.

“ It is only a pheasant crow,” said Gay, reassuringly, as she might have spoken to Billy or Betty.

“ The noises of the jungle birds and beasts can be imitated,” was the reply in a whisper that blended with the breeze in the foliage.

“ Tell me ; shall I bring you anything else ? What about a book to read ? ” said Gay, whose pity increased for this poor homeless nerve-racked creature.

He gazed at her as a man who hears in a dream.

“ A book ! No, no. I couldn’t keep watch if I read a book ! It is quinine that I want. This life in the forest gives me fever. The chalky stuff they sell in the bazaar as sulphate of quinine is no good at all. Bring me some in a well-corked bottle and I shall be eternally grateful.”

Gay drew the sock from her hand. The hole had disappeared under her busy fingers, and the sock was again serviceable. She put her thimble and needle back into her workbag. It was time to return to the bungalow. She looked up at the stranger with a smile in her eyes that should have brought him comfort if he needed sympathy. He might rely on her good faith and friendliness.

“ Won’t you come with me now to the bungalow and have some tea ? I could give you the quinine at once,” she said. “ No one will see you but the children. They will be in the garden. If you like you can stay just inside the forest while I fetch the quinine.”

He threw his hands out with a despairing gesture and backed from the path into the undergrowth of the jungle.

“ If you knew ! Oh, if you only knew ! I—I—— ”

His head shook as though a palsy had seized him ; his

voice faltered and was lost in a gasp of breathlessness. His single eye searched the forest round like a terrified stag.

Gay followed his glance, looking closely to right and left. She could detect nothing that should give rise to such an attack of nerves. Except for the whispering breeze, the call of the birds, the cry of the distant monkey, and the chuck ! chuck ! chuck ! of the lizard there was not a sound.

“Don’t be alarmed—” she began, as she brought back her wandering gaze to the path.

She suddenly ceased speaking. The white man had vanished.

CHAPTER XVI

GAY stared in blank astonishment as she sat on the limb of the old fallen giant. The white man had disappeared, and in his place stood the snake-charmer, Dakshi.

How he got there was a mystery. Only for a few seconds had her eyes been deflected from the Englishman, yet the change of figure had taken place. It was a strange piece of conjuring. The contrast between the two men was striking. The one was an unhappy alien; the other was a descendant of the old race of forest dwellers, as much at home in the jungle as the beast that shared it with him.

Dakshi looked a veritable faun of the woods—a canvas bag slung across his shoulder, panpipes hanging from his neck, fragments of moss and leaves clinging to his long tangled hair. He caught her eye and held her vision for a few seconds. Then his gaze fell oddly as a dog's gaze falls before the steady stare of his master.

The snake-charmer made a curious suggestive movement with his hands, such as is common with the native when he is disconcerted and resigns himself to fate, relinquishing whatever he may have been trying to accomplish as impossible.

Gay, no longer fearful of creating a panic, rose from her seat quickly and approached the old man. Was he going to disappear before her eyes like the European? If so she must extract an explanation from him first.

"Old father, what is this?" she asked in Tamil. "Who is the man with whom I have been speaking?"

"What man, lady?"

"The one-eyed Englishman who was standing there where you now stand. Does he belong to any estate over on the other side of the mountain?"

"I saw no Englishman, lady."

Gay laughed incredulously. "A one-eyed Englishman, a white man, talked with me not a minute ago. Who is he?"

He did not reply immediately; and as she waited for his answer, she felt a curious inclination come over her to regard the recent interview as fancy. Under the snake-charmer's steady gaze the mental vision of the Englishman lost its crispness and grew indistinct.

Gay's level brows contracted. She was aware that a strange influence, working on her senses, was tending to discredit their testimony and to undermine her belief in what her own eyes and ears had seen and heard. With a resolute effort she broke away from it, threw off the indistinctness and visualized the Englishman as she had seen him.

She drew a little nearer to the Gipsy from whose bag the head of a cobra had appeared while she had been speaking. She had no fear, like Smith, of snakes. They belonged to the forest, and would do her no harm if she did not tread on them.

"No use, old father!" she said, deliberately strengthening her will against his subtle hypnotic power. "Tell me his name, and where the white master lives with whom I have been talking."

"Your honour talked with me, and with no one else."

Again the queer sensation asserted itself that she had had a dream, and was the victim of her fancy. It annoyed her, and she continued with some sharpness.

"Talk sense, old man! Talk sense! Am I a child that you should speak to me thus?" Her vehemence sank as quickly as it had arisen, and she laughed. "Yes, headman of the Gipsies, you treat me like a baby! A big baby I should make and give plenty of trouble, too! Tell me, where does he live?"

Still the old satyr of the forest maintained his attitude.

"I live in the jungle, as the honourable mistress knows. I have my talipot palm-leaf hut where I keep many snakes. His excellency, Ee-Smith, does not like my snakes. They trouble him and turn his liver to water."

His hand caressed the cobra, and the understanding

reptile curved its body round his arm drawing its length from the bag. A ray of sunlight filtered through the trees and touched the iridescent scales with the green and blue tints of the rainbow.

There was a strange affinity between the man and the snake. His own movements were silent and sinuous. His brown skin harmonized with the warm brown markings of the scales. His small glittering black eyes matched the black eyes of the snake. In neither human nor reptilian eye was the pupil distinguishable from the iris.

"Very well, master of snakes," said Gay, good naturedly. "Keep your secret if you like. The English gentleman shall himself tell me where he is to be found when I——"

The sharp cry of a strange bird came from the foliage above the old man's head. Gay, familiar with the sounds of the forest, lifted her eyes to the spot whence the call seemed to come. When she looked back at the place where the snake-charmer had stood, he too had vanished. The satyr with his snake and his pipes was wiped off the scenes as completely as if a sponge had been passed over a slate. Not a trace remained of the brown figure and glittering scales; not a leaf stirred in the undergrowth, although the breeze murmured high in the trees overhead. Her sentence was left unfinished like the song of the whistling ploughboy bird, that sang low down in the ravine by the mountain stream.

Gay was not so surprised at the disappearance of the old man as she had been at that of the stranger. She had often watched the shy inhabitants of the forest, birds, beasts, and reptiles, and noticed their trick of vanishing under her eyes.

A grey and brown lizard stared at her with protruding eyes from the trunk of the tree. With a movement that was scarcely perceptible it vanished as she watched it. A russet bird eyed her from a branch just above the place where the lizard sat. She seemed to catch its eye and it straightway disappeared. A butterfly displaying its gorgeous colours on a leaf closed its wings and was indistinguishable from the twig that bore it.

So now these two men came into her view without warning and as mysteriously vanished.

"Really these people must belong to the Cheshire cat

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family," said Gay. "I begin to feel, like Alice in Wonderland, quite giddy."

She was no longer inclined to regard the interview with the European as unreal or fanciful. She recalled all that he said and his appearance without any doubt as to the reality of it.

As she walked slowly homewards she stopped now and then to listen. Among the many afternoon sounds she caught none that could be attributed to the people she had seen. Yet those same people could not be far off. They might even now be watching her from the jungle close at hand.

Who was the Englishman? Where had he come from?

She was aware that the ships passing to and fro through Colombo brought many waifs and wastrels from the further east, and also from the further south; but few of these wanderers remained in the island. She did not remember hearing of any tragedy among the planters, nor story of crime in the towns, that would necessitate flight on the part of the criminal. Yes; this man must have been Billy's geegee. She blamed herself for having neglected the appeal brought back by the child. It had been lost sight of in the contemplation of her own happiness. As soon as her eyes fell upon the stranger partially blinded as he was, it had all come back upon her with a rush; the mystery and her own secrecy concerning the finding of the message. She wondered if she ought to have told Geoffry. In the excitement over the news of the specials being called up and of Geoffry's unexpected declaration of his love, the matter had entirely slipped her mind.

Then she speculated upon the reason for the fugitive's presence in the forest. The mention of the word "police" had made no impression on him. He spoke vaguely of "the enemy." The enemy of late had meant the nations against whom the rest of the world were up in arms. There was no acknowledged enemy of Teuton origin in Ceylon as far as she knew.

The stranger must be hiding from the police. Perhaps he had committed manslaughter; killed some cooly in a fit of anger. Or he might have misappropriated the funds of an estate, or of a house of business where he had been

employed. Undoubtedly the detective constituted the enemy.

There was one other theory that carried weight with her. The poor fellow might be out of his mind, and under a delusion that he had committed a crime, a common form of hallucination where brain or nerves were deranged.

Whether sane or insane she determined that she would carry the quinine on the following day to the patana. At the same time she would try to get more information out of him. He ought not to be living in the jungle; exposure for any length of time would kill him. In a few weeks the rains would come in that part of the island, and the forest would be unfit for human habitation. Even the Gipsies would move away into a drier part. Fever would be common among the coolies on the estates. At such times the demand for quinine—quina as they called it in the native shops where it was sold—would be great. Fred was never without a good supply of the white snowy sulphate, and a small portion might well be spared for the stranger. She could take what she wanted from her own storeroom without any questions being asked. She always had a supply there ready for the use of the servants.

With the rains the little people would leave Toona Kelli. The heat in the low country would be over, and for some months they might safely live with their parents. Helen Loveden would probably stay on; but her movements must depend on what the future would bring forth.

Gay smiled as she thought of her brother. He was between the proverbial two bundles of hay with Nellie on one side and Helen on the other.

Pedro was bringing the tea into the drawing-room for the "grown-ups," as the children called their elders, as Gay ran up the steps of the verandah. She glanced at the clock. It was twenty minutes past three, and tea was at half-past. How the time had flown! She had been in the forest two and a half hours. It had seemed barely one hour. She went to her room and took off her hat. Geoffry's precious letter she locked away in her writing-table drawer. As she did so she remembered Fred, and his expressed wish to hear news of Geoff. Gay ran to his room.

"Geoffry is all right, Fred!" she announced. "He says

that Kandy is quiet, and that many people think that the unrest will fizzle out without any demonstration. I'm sure I hope it will be so."

Fred listened with interest. "What else does he say? Where's his letter?"

"He hopes to be back in a week, and to come and tell us the news as soon as possible," replied Gay, seating herself in one of the easy-chairs.

"Does he mention the names of the men who are with him?"

"No; but he says there are thirty special constables from the planting districts, and about twenty Kandy men in addition to the regular police."

"Have you got his letter with you?"

"No, I've left it in my room."

She made no offer to fetch it, and Fred had scruples about pressing the matter. Yet as Geoffry was a friend of the family, and his letters were usually public property between the brother and sister, he felt uneasy at this new reserve on Gay's part.

"Does he want me to do anything on his estate?" he asked.

"I think not. He makes no mention of Wanna Wella at all. Probably everything is in order. It's not like Geoff to be taken unawares; nor to have a conductor who cannot be trusted for a week or two."

There was silence. Gay's thoughts were with her lover; Fred's were directed towards his sister. A suspicion had entered his mind that there was something between her and his old friend. Yet nothing in her manner as she sat at ease in the armchair betrayed a special link. All the doubts of the morning returned, like a cloud of poisonous insects. He stirred uneasily and fidgeted with an unlighted cigarette. Suddenly he looked at her with keen questioning eyes.

"Gay, old girl, don't go falling in love without due consideration. You ought to know all about a man before you—you let yourself go."

It was difficult to say exactly what he meant without taking too much for granted. She laughed, and, to his great relief, showed no sign of confused self-consciousness.

"Right—o! old chappie! and mind you practise what

you preach. With Nellie on one side and Helen on the other, I tremble for you."

"That's different!" cried Fred, led off the trail at once by personalities, as she intended he should be. "There's nothing wrong with either Helen or Nellie, if by any chance I might be tempted to lose my heart."

"And by the same token there's nothing wrong with Geoff if I were tempted to let myself go."

"Of course not! but with a man life is so different. A woman's life is all above board, and on the surface——"

"Oh! is it? That's all you know of women, my learned brother! How many admirers, for instance, do you think our pretty young widow has? She hasn't told you of course!" cried Gay.

Fred stared at his sister aghast. Helen with admirers! The thought was strangely distasteful to him. He poured himself out a second cup of tea and forgot to add the milk. Gay's eyes shone with amusement. She had turned the tables with complete success. In the contemplation of his own affairs he had forgotten hers.

"Do you think she has any?" he asked.

"You can take it from me that she has. As to whether the admiration is returned I should not care to give an opinion. Hello! here she is!" concluded Gay as Mrs. Loveden entered the room. She had her hat and gloves on, and was ready for the promised walk.

"I'm not late, I hope," she said, looking from the brother to the sister, and noting the twinkle of mischief in Gay's smiling eyes.

"No, my dear, you're not late. Fred and I were just talking about you."

"Were you? What were you saying, if it isn't a secret?" asked Helen. Though she spoke to Gay she looked at Fred, who, poor fellow, was becoming hot and uncomfortable.

"I was telling Fred that I was sure you had many admirers."

"Oh, confound it, come now, Gay!" protested the unhappy Fred.

"Confess, my dear, confess! How many?" pursued Gay, much amused at her brother's confusion.

"Exactly fifteen and a half," replied Helen, serenely.

"The half being a boy?"

"No, an old man. They range in age from nineteen to seventy-nine. Not a bad record, is it? But then I live in Colombo, where men abound. Now, Mr. Goldenham, if you're ready let us be off."

Fred stared from his sister to his guest in puzzled astonishment.

"You're joking, Mrs. Loveden," he said, with a solemnity that made both the girls laugh.

"Am I?" replied Helen, with assumed simplicity. "I suppose you will be shocked if I say the more scalps the better. Isn't that so, Gay?"

"Don't ask me! I've had no experience at present; but I hope to have in the course of time. I'm several years—eight, isn't it?—younger than you."

Helen's eyes were upon Fred; she was enjoying his discomfiture amazingly.

"Poor Mr. Goldenham! I shall have to explain. Let us start. I think you will make a delightful father confessor."

Fred took up his hat and stick and lighted his cigarette which he felt he needed to soothe his ruffled nerves, and the two set out for their walk.

Gay returned to the drawing-room where the tea was waiting. She and Catherine were the only two. The children, with their ayahs, were in the garden, and little Betty, convalescent now, was carried to a snug sheltered spot under the orange trees.

"I hope Mrs. Loveden had some tea before she left," said Gay.

"It was taken to her room half an hour ago. Gay, may I talk to you about myself?"

"Of course you may, dear. What is it?"

Then Gay discovered that she was not the only one of the household that had a love affair. Catherine was too much absorbed in her own new happiness to have any curiosity about others. The talk began and ended with Dr. Caversham.

CHAPTER XVII

THE Eastern Gipsy does not differ in his characteristics from the Gipsy of the West. It is a physical impossibility for him to do a day's work in regular routine. He cannot labour hour by hour and day by day at the same occupation. But set him to travel, carrying goods of any kind, and he is happy and trustworthy. He will convey other men's property in strict honesty to any place agreed upon; and hand it over intact. The moment his obligation ceases he is quite ready to peculate and steal the very goods he so scrupulously conveyed.

Peculation is the second nature of the Gipsy; it is sport and recreation of the most fascinating type, irresistible to small and great alike.

The Gipsy child goes to no school. His education is given in the forest where he learns to imitate the ways of the lower animals. He learns to traverse the jungle with the caution of the deer, the stealthiness of the leopard, and the ubiquity of the wild pig. To the ordinary human being game tracks lead nowhere. To the Gipsy they are a maze of paths to be used. His intimate knowledge of them, and of his own distinguishing marks—invisible to any eyes but his own—makes him complete master of the geography of the jungle.

Although the Gipsy does not work in the sense of regular labour, he is full of activities. He may bask and sleep in the midday sun, but at dawn and at eve he is up and doing.

The children early learn their lessons. They issue just before sunrise from their parents' huts, shake out the rags in which they are clothed, and rearrange them round their wiry little bodies. They go to the stream with the men and clean their teeth. Nothing else is of consequence, as the

water is too cold at that time in the day to make bathing desirable.

They gather round the fire where coffee is already heating. The millet dumpling left from overnight is broken into portions and distributed. Then they scatter, these small men and women of the forest, if there is no domestic duty to keep them in camp. They are like the rats and jackals, out for what they can get. If nothing else they must bring home a bundle of firewood, sear and fit for burning.

The forest yields many more treasures than firewood, treasures that the rat and the monkey, the jackal and the wild pig seek with equal cunning. The only difference between man and his fellow-dwellers in the forest is the use of fire. Man boils his grain and flesh, his snails and roots, and fries his winged ants in preference to devouring them raw.

The children of Dakshi's tribe had a busy morning. Under Maridi's guidance they went from their new encampment near the waterhole to the old spot from which they had been summarily ejected by Asseri. They crept round the outskirts of the village below the cliff, keeping to the high ground that overlooked it. The village was deserted except for the women and three or four old men.

One of the boys older than the rest found a bill-hook and brought it to Maridi with a report that backyards were empty and left unguarded, the dogs being with the women and children in the street.

Maridi signalled to her little charges by the chuck-chuck-chucking of a lizard to come to her. She had climbed up the cliff to a ledge that ought to have been inaccessible to anything but a monkey. From the ledge she had a view of the village while she was screened by the vegetation that clung to the shelf of rock.

The little Gipsies crawled and wriggled and wormed their way along without exposing themselves to view or stirring a leaf or a stone. So gently did they move that no bird was startled into sudden flight with a jarring cry of warning. If not certain of the good intentions of the human being, the bird changed its position and continued its search for food further on.

"Sister!" whispered the boy who had stolen the bill-hook. "The young men with eyes like the hawk are gone.

The women are busy in the house or they talk together in the street so that they can hear nothing. I might have entered the house and carried away anything. I saw nothing but the wood-cutting knife that I could lift," concluded the child, in the aggrieved tone of one who has been cheated of his rights.

"It is enough; the master will be pleased."

"Where are the men?" asked one of the children.

"They have been called away; perhaps to do pujah. Sht! what is that?"

The sound of tomtoms fell on their ears.

"It is the death drum. Look!" cried the boy with the hook. "There is the funeral. See! the old men are carrying the dead; but they have only two paid mourners following. And the women talk and laugh as if it was a marriage. What does it mean?"

Maridi was not one to lose an opportunity of making the children's flesh creep with horror if she could manage it.

"Is it a small baby, a girl baby of no use? Listen!" asked one of the girls.

The tomtoms sounded again, and the mourners raised a melancholy wail as they threw their arms about and tore at their long loose hair with all the extravagant gestures of abandoned grief.

Maridi shook her head with superior knowledge. If she had been assured by the headman himself that the child by her side had guessed correctly—as was the case—she would have refused to believe it. Maridi was not without the love of dramatic romance common to all humanity. Her lively imagination pictured something quite different; it was founded on tradition, the unwritten folk-lore of the semi-civilized peoples of the East.

"It is not a baby," she said.

"Then what is it, sister?" asked a small girl with rounded eyes. "An old, old grandfather?"

Again Maridi's head jerked a negative. When she had kept them in suspense long enough to please her vanity she whispered.

"There is no dead body at all."

"Ah! bah! Aiyoh! Yemmah!" cried the little ones in a breath.

"Look! look, sister!" said the boy. "Look! the women follow! All who can move go to see the funeral; all except the old and the blind! They are leaving their houses empty with no one on guard. Even the dogs go. Sister?"

No need for the boy to explain. Instinctively the thief recognizes his opportunity and seizes it. Maridi looked at him and the boy comprehended without any words what was required of him. He rose from his squatting position, and, like a fox, stole down the hillside in the direction of the village, making use of every bit of cover that was available. Another boy followed with the same stealth; a third, a fourth, and a fifth, each in turn, each in perfect silence with the tread of the jungle cat.

"Not you," said Maridi as a sixth rose and looked to her for permission. "Not you; too young. You will be caught, and then the people will know too much. Already there has been trouble, and we were sent away. Nor you, nor you!" she continued, as two of the bigger girls pleaded to be allowed to go. "We will stay here, and I will tell you why the people of the village make a funeral procession without a dead body."

The restlessness abated, and the children drew nearer. They were three or four hundred feet above the village, yet too far down the cliff to show against the sky. Behind them higher up was the jungle, which they could reach easily in a minute or two if occasion arose for flight. Once in the jungle they would be as difficult to find as a pack of young jackals.

Tussocks of grass with reedy stems and long strands of tangled leaves grew on the ledge where they sat. Here and there a sturdy bush found foothold. Boulders were lodged among the herbage, and held by the roots that clung round them.

The children, with the cunning of the wild creature, sat almost motionless. They chewed the hard kernels of the jungle; and if they wanted another mouthful the hand that conveyed the nuts to the lips swayed with the soft motion of the grass or branch in the breeze.

Maridi, in close imitation of old Hathay, looked round at her audience, and then listened, her ear turned towards the

village below. The little ones followed her example closely. Active and agile though they were, and ever ready to take cover, they knew how to watch and be on their guard.

"They are making a mock funeral, those people down there," announced Maridi. "I know it because have I not heard many times the old grandmother tell the tale of the mukkan snake?"

"Ah, bah! the mukkan! It is as bad as the mopila in its evil ways," remarked one of the girls.

"Our people do not trouble to catch it. It is as bad as the tic polonga, and cannot be cured of its wickedness. It will not learn like the good snake, and when it is talked to in its own language it deafens its ears. Ah, a very bad devil lives in it."

"Aiyah! aiyoh! The mukkan has bitten a man of the village. He has died, and they carry him to the burial-ground!" said the girl who had first spoken.

"It is not so," said Maridi, delighted to have an opportunity of contradicting her junior with the authority of superior knowledge. "The girl who has been bitten—it must be a girl; she was doubtless gathering firewood in the jungle—the girl is not dead: she still lives. The mukkan is sly and cunning. When it bites it will neither eat nor drink nor sleep till the bitten one dies."

"How did you learn that, sister?" asked one of the girls, gazing at her with the worship of the younger and more ignorant child for the elder.

"A Sinhali woman told our big mother. Once, when the mistress was looking for the things that were to happen, written in the woman's hand, she heard the story."

"What was it, sister?" said another girl, as Maridi paused.

"It was a never-to-be-forgotten time. Three bits of silver did the Sinhali put on her hand, saying, 'Tell me true word only, and if it is good news, great shall be thy reward.'"

"It was good news?"

"Very good: and the woman was pleased. When the big mistress had ended the telling of the hand, the other, pleased with all she had heard, spoke of the news in the village. It was about a man who had been bitten by a snake. It was far down at the foot of the hills where the water

ceases from scolding at the rocks in its bed and walks more slowly and in silence. He was a woodcutter belonging to the Government. He had been ordered to cut down some trees where the ground was soft and moist, a place beloved by snakes."

"Dah! why did he not go to the big master and ask him to draw away the snakes with his pipes?" asked the big girl.

"He did so, and gave fifty cents for much pipe-playing. The good snakes came as soon as they heard the music. Then followed the tic polongas; they were ill-tempered and angry, but they had to come. The mukkan deafened its ears by hissing in them."

Maridi made a soft hissing sound that thrilled the children with its excellent imitation of the only voice nature has given to the serpent tribe. It was not terror that stirred them, for no Gipsy has any fear of the snake; they listened with pure pleasure, and softly imitated her. When the snake chorus died away Maridi resumed her tale.

"The woodcutter felled the trees one by one till he came to that in which the mukkan lived. As the man lifted his axe to strike the first blow, the mukkan rose in the grass at his feet, and bit his leg."

"Aiyoh! the poor man! Did he die?"

Maridi was not to be hurried in a story, which she was enjoying as much as the children. She held up her hand for silence, and they all listened, not to her voice this time, but to the various sounds of the world about them. To their jungle-bred ears the different voices of nature did not blend on one chorus. Each sound was separate and distinct; each told its own tale. From the village came the drumming of the funeral tomtoms retreating in the distance towards a level piece of ground nearer to the foothills. Another sound struck their ears; it was the stifled cackle of a fowl, silenced immediately after the first note of its alarm.

Eye met eye with silent comprehension and white teeth gleamed between smiling lips. Fowl curry was a dish for a Rajah in the opinion of that little group of watchers, and fowl curry they would have the next day for their dinner. From the jungle above came the various notes of the birds. The feathered folk talked of their food, and no scream of

warning indicated the presence of a stranger. Maridi continued—

“The bitten one was carried home by his fellow-woodmen,” said Maridi taking up the thread of her tale. “The wicked snake, after the custom of all mukkans, coiled its body round the tree and tied itself in a knot to remain there till it heard the death drum. As long as the snake stayed knotted round the tree the man could not recover. If the snake was killed he would die. Only one way was there to recovery : to untie the knot and remove the mukkan.”

“But, sister ! who could untie the knot of the deadly poisonous mukkan ?” asked one of the children.

“Only the mukkan itself.”

“Yah ! bah ! and who could make the snake untie itself ? Not even the devil that lived in the tree above it,” said another.

Maridi nodded her head with superior wisdom, intimating that a remedy for the evil was known to herself, and she could tell what it was if she chose.

“There is a means known to the villagers where the woodcutters live. The mukkan, for all its spiteful cunning, has no sense. The woman told our big mistress the secret. A funeral procession was made with death tomtoms and paid mourners. Grass was arranged to look like a corpse under a death cloth. Flowers were placed on the bier, and the bearers chanted the many virtues of the apparently dead man. Slowly the procession moved to the place where the mukkan sat tied round the tree. It saw the procession pass and heard the mourners wailing. It believed that the man was dead. Then it untied itself and glided away satisfied.”

“And the bitten one ?”

“As soon as the knot was loosened and undone, the pain in the man’s body and the dullness of eye passed. He asked for coffee and rice cake ; and the next day he was well and able to get up. He walked and ate and slept as though the snake poison had never entered into him.”

“And the funeral that has even now been made in the village ?”

“Is to deceive the mukkan into thinking that the bitten one is dead. Ah ! it is as evil in its designs as the mopila snake.”

Maridi peeped from behind the large tussock of grass that screened her and her little audience. She looked down at the village with the far-seeing eyes of her race. The procession had passed out of sight. A straggling queue of sightseers, mostly women and children, followed.

"But what if the mukkan finds out that it has been cheated?" asked one of the company who thirsted for more jungle tales.

"Then it watches and waits and waits and watches in the roof of the sick man's house till it can find another chance to bite him. When it has bitten him again there is no hope. The snake ties itself round a beam in the roof and stays there till it sees that the poison has done its work. Hungry or thirsty it keeps the knot tight, and the man dies. The Sinhali woman said that you may bring a star down from heaven where the wise gods live, or fetch mud from the deepest bottom of the sea where the great serpent god lies, and you will not cure the man who is bitten by a mukkan as long as the snake's body remains knotted."

There was a pause during which ears and eyes were alert. It was time for the boys to be returning from their marauding expedition with the plunder. The soft cooing of a pigeon drew all eyes in its direction. It came from below. The children remained squatting as motionless as the small boulders strewn among the tussocks of grass and the bushes.

"The mukkan is bad, bad, bad. It is a snake of the lowest caste. The cobra is a Brahmin; the tic polonga is a Rajah; but the mukkan is a pariah, a sweeper, a shoe-maker, the lowest of the low," concluded Maridi with contempt.

As she spoke one of the boys peered at her from behind a bush a little distance away, and on a level with the spot where they were seated. Although every eye was fastened on him, not a movement betrayed the excitement created by his appearance. In his hand he carried a fowl. Its neck had been wrung. He did not join them, but passed on towards the jungle above, climbing up by ledges and shelves and projections. Five minutes later another boy crept out of the grass on all fours, looked round at them and showed his teeth like a young jackal. As they gazed at him he too disappeared, leaving no trace behind him. Round his

waist was a brown and buff cloth that had been left by the owner in the sun to dry.

Maridi signalled to one of the bigger girls. The child rose and crept away. She was soon lost to view in the rank growth of herbage on the ledge. One by one the children vanished without a sound, each taking its own way ; and no two paths were exactly the same.

Maridi waited. She had seen four of the boys go by, each bearing some treasure stolen from the villagers. She was looking for the fifth and last. He came, bringing a couple of kitchen knives, an iron spoon, and a small enamelled iron cup, precious kitchen properties highly prized by the Gipsy women.

Without a word Maridi started off for the jungle, moving swiftly but with unremitting care, taking cover under bush and boulder till the mazy game tracks of the jungle were reached. Then it was easy going, and she had no fear of discovery and pursuit. She and her little companions knew every trail, every hole and corner of the forest. It would be more easy to catch the wild monkey or the jackal than the Gipsy.

The midday sun was overhead, and the hotpot was steaming on the camp fire when they arrived back in camp. A liberal portion was doled out by the gratified women who served the meal. When the food was eaten they all slept the sleep of the just without a qualm of conscience. In the eyes of the tribe the boys had done a good morning's work, and acquitted themselves well.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE following day, mindful of her promise to the stranger, Gay ordered the pony to be saddled ready for her use after the big breakfast. She avoided the many traps that might have detained her in the house had she not been wary, and escaped to her room. She changed into her tweed riding suit, and put on her sun hat. Turning a blind side to the many little domestic tasks that seemed to call loudly for attention, she slipped off to the stables a little after one o'clock.

The post that morning brought a second letter from Geoffry. It was as thick an envelope as the one on the previous day. She was obliged to run the gauntlet of three pairs of eyes as Fred handed her the budget. In Catherine's eyes was a sympathetic comprehension. Helen's shone with curiosity and a personal interest. If Gay by any chance thought of marriage—well—it would simplify matters considerably if Fred's sister had an immediate prospect of making a home elsewhere.

Fred's eyes were full of doubt bordering on distrust. This sudden correspondence must have some meaning. It was highly improbable that it would end in nothing but friendship. This time he gave her the letter without asking to be told if any messages for himself were sent. Gay pocketed the letter with lips firmly closed; but the smile in her eyes did not tend to banish her brother's misgivings.

Gay mounted quickly and hurried her pace until she had gained the seclusion of the forest. The syce was told to remain behind, an order he obeyed willingly.

As soon as she reached the steeper part of the path, she laid the reins on the pony's neck and left it to take its own

time in climbing the hill. Her whip hung from her wrist, and she had her hands free to open the letter.

Again there were three sheets closely covered with Geoff's neat handwriting. When she had read it through she felt that he had not written a word too much. She was glad to think that she had answered the first letter on the previous evening. The tappal cooly had taken it to the post this morning. Gay recalled the words in which she had responded to that first love-letter of her life. Alone with her pen she had written more than she would ever have dared to whisper had Geoffry been present.

The soft colour deepened on her cheeks and a light came into her eye; there was an expression on her face that the Gay of old never knew. She was glad—yes, glad—that he had given her the opportunity of letting him see all that was within her heart.

It seemed to Gay that the world was very beautiful. Had she ever seen the sky so pure and sweet a colour? Had the trees ever looked so graceful, with the brilliant white light of the sun reflected in a million sparkling points from their glossy leaves? The forest was hushed still in its noontide rest. Its eyes seemed half closed and its lips smiling in luxurious enjoyment. It was surely sympathizing with her in her joy; in testimony of its sympathy it wafted towards her the incense of its warm scent from sun-kissed blossom and luxuriant vegetation.

Gay read the letter a second time. He must have known when he wrote it what her answer to the first would be. He was so sure of her love; so certain of the surprising happiness that was in store for both of them. He was so grateful for the priceless gift he had won. His little chum! his best beloved! his first and only love! God had indeed been good to him! He prayed that he might be worthy of her—and so on, in the sweet immortal language that will never die as long as the world moves round the sun.

The lacework shade of the forest gave place to a hot flood of sunshine. Without realizing how quickly the pony was covering the ground, she found herself on the edge of the patana. A short distance away lay the waterhole with ruffled surface, a patch of vivid blue in a setting of brilliant

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green. Its muddy banks were freshly trodden by the pads and hoofs of its visitors during the night and early dawn. The stream passing through the pool kept it sweet and clear and at a uniform level.

Gay put away the letter, gathered up the reins and glanced round. She had the patana and the stream—as she had the forest—to herself. No trace of the stranger was visible. He had mentioned the path to the elephant rocks as being less frequented. She took it and stopped at the entrance to the forest. The spot was higher than the pool, and from it she had a good view of the patch of grassland. She could also see if any travellers were approaching from the Devala side in time to move away before they came up with her.

At the end of five minutes she imitated the call of the barbet. After a pause she repeated the call. An answer came from the edge of the jungle.

She knew enough of her forest to be aware that though the human ear might be deceived, the bird would recognize a strange voice and would be too suspicious to reply. The answer she had heard was from the man she had come to meet.

A few minutes later a voice close at hand said: "So you have come! You are very kind to a poor persecuted wanderer."

She glanced round in the direction from which the sound came but could see no sign of the fugitive. Mindful of the nervousness he had shown at their previous meeting, Gay avoided any abrupt movement or speech. She slowly turned her head back and stared steadily between the pony's ears at nothing in particular. After the lapse of half a minute she ventured to speak.

"I have brought the quinine, and some food as well," she said slowly and without raising her voice.

A movement among the bushes at the edge of the jungle caught her eye and she saw the head and shoulders of the Englishman appear. He emerged from his leafy cover step by step, glancing to right and left like some wild suspicious creature, until he stood a yard or so beyond the undergrowth.

"Come this way," he whispered hoarsely.

She was still in the saddle. The pony picked its steps

through the long tussocky grass and stumbled into a game track that had escaped her notice.

"Follow me," said the stranger, speaking in short, jerky sentences so that he might listen constantly in between. "Dismount. You can't ride here. This is a sambur track ; not high enough under the bushes for anything over fifteen hands."

He slipped back into the foliage and stood waiting with an impatient restlessness until she was out of the saddle and in the game path.

Gay obeyed his directions. She did not like the prospect of taking an unknown path in this part of the forest. It was not familiar, like the jungle nearer home. She wondered if he would suddenly abandon her as he had abandoned Billy at the rocks.

Slinging the reins over her arm she tramped along the track, the pony following docilely with the confidence that the domestic animal shows in its master. As she walked she broke down a branch here and there, leaving it hanging on the bush ; and she trod down the herbage as much as possible under her feet.

The food she had brought was wrapped in several pieces of paper. She took the outer covering from the small loaf of bread and tore the paper into bits. She dropped a fragment here and there with the same object in view. The paper would lie where it fell. No wind sufficient to blow it away could penetrate the thick jungle.

Her companion glanced round now and then and caught sight of her action.

"It's all right," he said. "I'll show you the way back. I ought to know the forest by this time !" And as he spoke he increased his pace.

"I would rather find it for myself," replied Gay.

They reached one of those open places that were to be found in the jungle where the presence of a group of boulders of enormous size reduced the density of the undergrowth and gave more space as at the elephant rocks.

"Stop !" cried Gay, decisively as the thought suddenly presented itself that he was walking aimlessly and without any definite object. "I go no further. This is quite far enough from the path through the patana."

He halted abruptly as though accustomed to obey a given order. Her words had in truth startled him out of a day-dream in which he was travelling feverishly. He gazed round anxiously. Then, satisfied with the peaceful appearance of the forest, he gathered courage and came closer to her.

"Did you bring the quinine?" he asked.

"Here it is," said Gay, diving into the canvas bag slung across her shoulder. "I have also brought bread, cake, and some biscuits; and I put in a small tin of beef."

She drew the parcels out one by one and placed them in his hands. He held them helplessly as though his thoughts were far away.

"Thank you so much; this is kind of you! I shall be eternally grateful. Ah! yes, food!—good English food!" he continued as he slowly comprehended the nature of her gifts. "The fare in the jungle is not good. These are luxuries which I shall enjoy."

"What is your usual fare?" she asked.

"Raggi and hotpot. The hotpot is good. It is made of fowl and venison and pigeon. Sometimes I can get a few biscuits and bananas, but not often."

"Are you on a hunting expedition?"

"Yes! yes!—that's it! Hunting!"

He laughed with a harsh cackle that had no mirth in it. Mad? He must be mad, thought Gay. But no fear entered her mind. The self-reliance of youth sustained her belief in herself and her ability to extricate herself from any difficulty should it occur.

He did not look like a hunter of any sort. He carried no gun and was not dressed as a sportsman. Perhaps he meant that he was hunting moths and butterflies. There again the suggestion was not convincing, for he had no visible means of catching insects nor of securing them when caught.

"What are you hunting?" she asked.

He had broken a piece off the loaf and was eating it with relish. At her question his jaws stopped moving and he began to tremble. The loaf in his fingers fell to the ground. She picked it up and he received it back mechanically and without thanking her.

"Don't be frightened," she said soothingly as she might have spoken to Billy. "There's nothing to be afraid of. If you tell me what it is that you fear, I may be able to help you."

"Will you? Will you, really? Will you hide me?"

"Hide you?" she repeated in surprise. "Of course I will, you poor thing! What do you want to hide from?"

He came closer. The trembling increased, and again the parcels of food dropped.

"Here, let me put these things in your pockets," she said as she collected her gifts once more.

She stuffed them away in the various pockets of his coat as he stood helpless with his tremours. She could feel his body trembling in every nerve and muscle as she chanced to touch him. Her heart was filled with pity. She let her hand rest on his arm.

"Steady on! steady on! There's nothing to be afraid of in these jungles but the fever for which I have brought the remedy. Even the animals and birds are our friends," said Gay, authoritatively.

"You don't know! You talk of a hunting expedition. Yes, that's right; but it is not the kind that you have in your mind. I am not hunting. *I am the hunted!*"

"Oh, come now," cried Gay, in protest, and allowing herself to smile, "you mustn't think that! This is Ceylon, the home of the tea-planter. Men are not hunted in an English colony."

"They used not to be—but——" He looked at her, and his single eye widened with the wildness of a trapped beast.

"Well, tell me why you think men are hunted in the island? What reason can you give?" she said softly, as she moved her fingers with a firm massaging touch along his arm. "You are still shaking. Try and control yourself. Throw off this strange fear that seems to have mastered you."

Again she felt as though she were talking to Billy and endeavouring to reason him out of some childish unreasonable fright.

"It's all very well for you to talk!" he replied with fretful irritation; but as he spoke she could feel that the

palsy was abating. The more cross he became the better pleased she would be. "You would tremble if you had seen the sights I have seen and gone through the agony that I have suffered!"

"Perhaps I might; I can't tell. We none of us know how much we can bear before we reach the breaking-point," said Gay, whose soft tones acted like a sedative on his nerve-racked system. "Anyway the danger for you is past and over, and there is nothing further to fear now that you have reached Ceylon."

"But there is! There is danger! I am still pursued!—still hounded on to my fate by a tireless tracker. You don't know!"

His voice took a despairing note, and failed in the last sentence so that the words were difficult to catch.

"Will you tell me why you think that you are pursued?" she asked, under the belief that if he explained his reasons for such an extraordinary conviction, she might be able to combat his fears and prove that he had no grounds for them.

He looked at her with a sudden suspicion, but drew yet closer so that he might lower his voice still more. Lifting his head he listened intently, turning this way and that as though he feared some one would jump out of the jungle upon him.

"Living in the jungle, one learns to use one's ears. They are as useful as one's eyes. I'm glad those devils spared my ears. I wish I had the sense of smell as strongly as the sambur and the jackal have it," he said.

A barbet chuck! chucked! in a tree near at hand. He glanced round, startled.

"That was the real bird," he remarked, with a query in his voice as if he wanted a confirmation of his opinion.

"It was a barbet all right," replied Gay, confidently. "Why do you suppose some one is pursuing you?"

His eye was bent upon her as though he tried to penetrate into the depths of her mind.

"You won't tell any one? Promise! Swear that what I say shall never pass your lips!"

"I promise," replied Gay, promptly, and without any serious thought that she was giving her promise to a sane man.

"Swear!"

"I swear," she answered, smiling with amusement; it was impossible to take the situation seriously.

Her steady hand closed over his wrist, and she held him firmly as she would have held a frightened child. Her touch had a quieting effect. The tremours lessened still more and his voice became firmer; although he continued to speak in short sentences and with a constant turning of the head from side to side to listen to the many sounds of the jungle.

"After I had finished my training at home," he began abruptly, "I went to the West Front. I was all through two great battles." He named the places in a hoarse whisper as though he distrusted even the trees and the rocks.

"Ah! that was very severe work for our dear brave men. I read about them at the time," said Gay, as he paused.

"It was worse for those devils!—those devils!" he said with growing fierceness. "I tell you I went mad from the sights I saw. We became fiery devils ourselves; we were forced into it. We were filled with a lust to kill. No one knows what the horrors of war are till one is in the middle of it. It brings an awful madness. I went raving mad for the time. I only wanted to kill! kill! kill! I pressed on and on, careful only not to leave anything alive behind me. I must have slain between twenty and thirty Bosches. I wish it had been a hundred! a thousand! a million! and that I had died in the slaughter! My ammunition was exhausted, my bayonet broken; the butt end of my rifle was smashed, and I was at last disabled by a flesh wound in my wrist. Where my comrades were I did not know. In my homicidal frenzy I had lost sight of them. I was taken prisoner."

He stopped and gazed at her as a man might gaze who had disclosed a great secret, although there was nothing about his tale that in Gay's opinion required secrecy.

"You poor thing!" she said compassionately. "Then you have been a prisoner and have escaped?"

He nodded his head.

"If that is so what have you to fear now that you have reached the island? This is British soil. You are safe."

"I haven't told you all," he replied moodily.

"I should like to hear everything," said Gay, encouragingly. "Go on."

"They took me to hospital and treated my wound, keeping me without food or medical assistance until all the German wounded had been attended to. But that did not matter. My wound was not serious, and it mended quickly, like a cut finger, and without complications. I need not have gone into hospital; but they had a reason for taking me there."

He was becoming calmer and spoke more coherently as he went on. Gay still retained a hold on his arm, and he made no attempt to shake it off. There may have been something magnetic in her touch that communicated her calm sanity to the overwrought man.

"Why did they want to keep you in hospital?" she asked, as he relapsed into a troubled silence.

"They wanted information," he replied shortly. "An officer whom they called Vogelein came to see me. Although I knew German well he used English. He asked me for certain information about the work of our sappers at a point of the line which he named. I happened to know something about it. Before the German attack—in which I was taken prisoner—I had formed one of the covering party. It was not by any means a cushy job," he added, with a grim twist of the lips into something like a smile.

"You couldn't give him the information," said Gay, quickly.

"Of course I couldn't. To have told what we were doing would have imperilled the lives of the sappers as well as their protectors. I refused. The Bosch colonel spoke smoothly and promised me my liberty. If I would tell him just where the men were working it would be sufficient. I should be allowed to go free with a tacit understanding that I might make my way across the line if I chose. It was all so plausibly put. The outline of escape was so persuasively drawn; but I held firm to my determination."

"Was he angry at your refusal?" asked Gay, who was

becoming more impressed as the man shook off his extreme nervousness.

"He showed no sign of annoyance nor even of impatience at my obstinacy. Colonel Vogelein came every day with the same demand, and each time I refused."

Suddenly the stranger caught his breath and listened as a snake eagle screamed overhead. He recognized the cry and continued—

"On the fourth day he leaned towards me as I stood before him, took me by the arm, and turned me to the light. He looked close into my eyes, and called up the doctor who was waiting at a little distance to fulfil this big man's orders at any moment. 'This Englishman has something the matter with one of his eyes,' he said. 'I am afraid he will have to lose it.' The doctor, a big flabby brute with the look of a cheetah, came up and examined the eye. I remained quiet and passive in his hands, never dreaming of treachery. 'Himmel! you are right, sir! There must be an operation!' he answered."

"What was the matter?" asked Gay, as he ceased speaking. "Was it nothing curable?"

"My eyes were as sound as yours. It was the price I was to pay for my obstinacy. Before I could guess his design this fiend of a butcher put his hand in his pocket and drew out a lancet. I felt an intolerable pain and screamed in my agony. I fainted. When I recovered my senses I was in bed in a darkened room. I was blinded for life in one eye."

CHAPTER XIX

"Oh, the brutes! the devils! Is it possible that a human being belonging to a civilized nation could be guilty of such inhumanity?" cried Gay, whose blood had run cold as she listened.

The man shifted from one foot to the other, and she felt him shudder. She released her hold on him, thinking that he was uneasy under her touch. Instantly the trembling returned.

"Don't let go! As long as I feel the grip of your hand on my arm I am safe. If I could be near you, under the same roof, perhaps I should not have these shaking fits."

"Well, come and stay with us in our bungalow," suggested Gay, with a heartiness that showed she meant it.

"No, no; I can't! I haven't told you all. You don't understand yet why I have to hide."

"I could hide you in the bungalow."

"The servants would know I was there, and they would tell. I remained in the hospital a week and then my tormentor came again. If anything he was smoother and more gentle in his manner than ever. He did not deceive me this time. I knew the fiendishness of his nature; and while he talked I saw that doctor-devil waiting, waiting within call as though he were thirsting to do me evil. Again the same questions; again the same promises; and now an open threat. The price of my obstinacy was to be my remaining eye."

"Horrible! You poor boy! What could you do, weakened and broken as you were with their inhuman cruelty?" cried Gay, closing her fingers over his long, thin, delicate hand.

"I hesitated and kept silent. The doctor came nearer. I saw him take the lancet from his waistcoat pocket. Fortu-

nately for me I again lost consciousness. When I came to myself there was only the nurse, a fat, wooden-faced creature—a nursing machine, not a woman, and a very indifferent machine at that. I asked her where I was and the date of the month. Then I calculated. To-morrow was the day for the—the——”

“——the event that they wanted you to disclose,” said Gay, helping him out.

“Yes! How did you know?” he asked, looking at her with sudden suspicion.

“I guessed; it has all been in the papers, you know. Go on, if you don’t mind. It will do you good to get the story off your chest.”

He took her hand in his and held it tight. Its possession seemed to give him confidence.

“If only I could put off the answer till the next day, it would not matter what I said. The situation would be changed. The company of engineers whom we covered while they worked would be safe. I shammed semi-consciousness and succeeded in being left unmolested till the following morning. The two came again early. They found me better, much better. I readily explained that I could not spare my remaining eye; and was prepared not only to tell them all I knew, but to draw a sketch-map of the place where the mines were being made. I also explained that being only one of the covering party, I could not give them any diagrams of the form or the direction of the mining. Vogelein was evidently pleased; he promised me my liberty and sufficient money to take me south. I told him that I dared not return to our own lines after my revelations; I must be allowed to get to one of the Mediterranean ports so that I could go east. Fool, that I was! I gave myself away without thinking! But I had reasons for wishing to come east.”

Gay looked at him with mixed feelings of pity and repulsion.

“Did you really——?” She could not finish her sentence. “Play the traitor,” were the words that hovered on her lips.

He laughed again, a low, short, barking laugh that had no mirth in it. It jarred upon her ears, and once more

roused the suspicion that his tale was the dreadful fabrication of a diseased brain.

"Yes, I gave it all away—with one reservation. I drew maps; I marked the spot where the sappers were at work. Vogelein took some photographs out of his pocket-book and compared my sketches with them. He nodded his head and said, 'Not a bad draughtsman, my friend!' Then he questioned me about the dates, when the work would be finished, and when the mines would be fired. It was here I deceived him. I told him that I had information from a sapper friend that the work could not be completed till a week hence at the earliest. This was not correct. If the scheme was carried out according to the real plan the Bosche ought to be hoisted 'West' some time during the next twenty-four hours—that is to say, if our people intended to make use of the trap they had laid as soon as it was ready; and I prayed Heaven that there would be no delay. My perjury, if discovered before I got away, could be covered by the explanation that the date had been wrongly estimated by the sappers, who of course were not in the secret of Headquarters' intentions. They could only judge by the condition of the works."

"Was the German officer satisfied?" asked Gay; his tale was clear and coherent, yet she doubted.

"Quite; and he kept his word. I walked out of the hospital with the doctor, who provided me with an old German great-coat and cap; and as soon as the man left me I fled. The wonder is that I did not lose the sight of the other eye, coming out of the darkened room in my weak and nerve-shaken state. How I got out of that cursed country I don't know. Long after I was among friendly people I travelled in terror, hiding during the day and tramping by night, southwards, always south, and always in danger of being arrested if I wore the overcoat. The cap I threw away. Now and then I had shivering fits, when I seemed paralyzed with fear and was physically unable to stand upon my legs. Oh, it was agony! Occasionally I have the fits now; when they come I am like a child in a nightmare."

"Why didn't you give yourself up to the military authorities as an escaped prisoner?"

"Because I did not know whether my information had been of use. If the firing of the mines had been by any chance delayed it meant disaster to the scheme and probably death to many of our brave fellows."

There was silence, and Gay felt her heart overflow with pity.

"Don't think of it! It is all too distressing, too painful."

"I must finish my story. I reached Marseilles and got employment on the wharves, taking the night shifts in preference. I was able to clothe myself better and buy a shade for my eye. Later, when I had saved sufficient money, I went on to Egypt, working my way there on a mule transport—mules are the very devil to handle, and no one envied me my billet. I stayed some time at Port Said, where I again took work on the wharves. This time it was not so hard, and I had Indian coolies under me. The odd part of it was that the harder I laboured the less my nerves troubled me. From Port Said I went on to Colombo as a steerage passenger in an Australian ship."

"And when you reached Colombo you surely felt safe; and you had nothing further to fear," said Gay, reassuringly.

"Except revenge on the part of the enemy for having furnished them with false information about the date. If the Germans were caught—as they must have been, badly—they would see to it that I paid."

"Impossible! They couldn't revenge themselves at this distance!"

He looked at her with a grim expression, and leaning towards her, whispered hoarsely:

"As I walked up from the landing-stage in Colombo towards the Grand Oriental Hotel, intending to take a room and see an agent with a view to getting work on one of the tea estates before I established my identity and claimed my own property, a note was put into my hand by a cooly. It was anonymous. In it were the words: 'You played us false. Your dates were wrong. You owe us something. Sooner or later we shall take it—as we took the other.'"

"Fiendish! devilish!" said Gay, thoroughly roused.

"It was written on a half sheet of the G.O.H. paper. The ink was fresh. The enemy was there in the hotel,

waiting for me, waiting for his opportunity to rob me of my remaining eye."

"Horrible!"

"He is a German agent; and when he has hounded me long enough to please himself, he will carry out his infernal commission. I need not tell you that I left Colombo that very day—not by rail. He would have his spies at the railway station. I travelled in a country cart, and remained in hiding a month with some Sinhalese near Kandy. One day a villager brought me a slip of paper. He said it had been given to him by a Moorman in Kandy. On it was written in the same hand: 'The time is not far off now when Colonel Vogelein will claim his dues.' Again I fled, tramping by night, hiding by day. My money was nearly gone. I thought I would go straight into the jungle and seek death there. But death is not to be found when you seek him. I met the old snake-charmer in the forest. There were good reasons why he should befriend me. For a long time I have been living in his hut, protected by him and his cobras and his youngest son, a lad who is not quite all there. They all know me, including the snakes, and I feel tolerably safe behind them. But I am troubled with fever; and when the rains come, which will be soon, the fever will be worse. That was why I asked you for quinine."

"Which I have brought; and here in the forest you are safe and have no cause to be nervous," said Gay in a cheery voice.

For answer he pulled out of his pocket a slip of paper and showed it to her. On it were these words: "The old snake-charmer with his cobras cannot save you from your fate."

"I picked this up on the cliff overlooking the Sinhalese village. It must have been brought there by one of the villagers. What does it mean but pursuit? I shall not be killed. I shall be overpowered. Hands will creep up from my neck, across my face—— Oh, God! I can't bear it! I can't bear it! I would far rather be shot outright."

One of his nerve attacks seemed imminent.

"Courage! courage! You mustn't give way like this! Things can't be as bad as you think. Come back to the

bungalow with me. I promise faithfully that I will keep you safe."

A shudder was the only reply. She slipped an arm in his, and pity for him brought the ready tears to her eyes. If only she could persuade him to come home with her at once all would be well. He could be sheltered in Fred's sitting-room and have the little bachelor's spare room next to it. Dr. Caversham would be there; he was coming to tea and would stay to dinner. Something might be done to allay these terrible fits of terror brought on by the shock of his sufferings at the hands of his enemies.

"Come with me," she repeated, drawing him towards the track by which they had reached the spot.

He yielded to the pressure of her arm, and slowly paced by her side, the pony following. Gay talked cheerfully of all they would do and how he should be watched and guarded. It would be impossible for any one to enter the bungalow. The doors had strong bolts; the windows were barred; a watchman was always on duty. He answered little as he staggered by her side. His knees were weak and, like the Psalmist, all his bones seemed out of joint.

They had not proceeded more than twenty yards when a distant sound fell on their ears. It was the voice of a transport cooly on the mountain path. He chanted a refrain of a few notes in a high penetrating tone. It was the nasal monotonous song of the lonely traveller who chants to sustain his spirits and keep away the demons that he believes are lurking in the trees and rocks to do him harm.

The Englishman started, broke away from her and looked wildly in the direction from which the singing came. It must have been more than half a mile distant, and there was no fear whatever that the man would come along the winding game track that they were following.

"It is a blind—a blind to cover the enemy!" he cried. "I can't trust you or any one else!"

He plunged down the game track in the opposite direction and disappeared from view.

There was a rustle in the undergrowth of something moving. Gay stood still, listening intently. The creature, whatever it was, kept out of her sight. It retreated in the same direction as the fugitive had taken. A snapping of

a twig and a soft brushing through the thick leafage betrayed its presence. In a few seconds the sound died away, and Gay was alone in the forest, except for the birds and insects and the hidden reptiles and beasts that dreaded instinctively the eye of man.

Gay stood there in the depths of the jungle face to face with a mystery that held all the elements of a tragedy which the forest hid and would probably never disclose.

CHAPTER XX

GAY caught her breath in a deep gasp after the strain of listening. The sound of those mysterious footsteps in the jungle had sent the colour from her face, her heart beat wildly. Although she had done her best to persuade herself that the stranger was labouring under a delusion, his clear narrative carried conviction. The man was sane enough, but his nerves had given way. He was being pursued with relentless malignity by one of the countless army of agents which the Prussian murderers had enlisted in their service.

It made her shiver to think that possibly the cruel tracker was at work at that very minute, and that the steps she had heard were his. He might come up with the fugitive and effect his horrible purpose while she stood there. His victim would be left blind and helpless, to meet a lingering death cruelly prolonged by the food she had brought and thrust into his pockets. The jungle would cover up his tracks; the undergrowth would hide his body; and the secret of the tragedy would never be revealed.

Who would miss him or give the alarm? Who would search? It would only be one more of those terrible secrets confided by fate to the forest.

Gay had heard more than one story of men being lost in the jungle; of their aimless wanderings in the dense gloom, too deeply buried in the vegetation to judge direction or to distinguish the points of the compass by the sun or the stars; of the gradual extinction of hope; the coming of despair; the breaking of the nerve tension and loss of reason under the calamity; the misleading visions conjured up by the brain; of frantic rushes at headlong speed by endless game tracks, when the eye saw nothing and failed to recognize any

guiding sign ; of the final collapse, when too weakened to move further ; of the wanderer stretched at full length to await the end.

Then would come the jackal, the wild pig and jungle rat, with perhaps a prowling leopard or tiger cat ; all waiting and watching with inquiring sniffs and impatient whimpers. Tales had been told by planters who themselves had been near to losing their way in one or other of the vast forests that are still the pride of Ceylon.

Gay could bear it no longer. She recalled his story ; his agonized scream as the dastardly action took place. She swung her whip round at the pony to wake it out of its reverie and rouse a desire for the stable. It quickened its steps and followed her willingly.

She was thankful that she had been careful to blaze her trail. The track she and her irresponsible leader had pursued forked in three or four places, and she had not observed the branch. Once she took a wrong turning. Fortunately it led steeply down to a stream without stepping-stones. She remembered no stream in her walk and turned back instantly.

Retracing her way was a task requiring the exercise of all her wits. The branching paths were not set at right angles and it was difficult to discover the correct trail. She ran a danger of overlapping and passing it. To miss it would mean following the fugitive's track into the forest. Then might come confusion of mind and uncertainty as to which direction she was moving in ; whether outward or homeward. She wore a little compass on her watch-chain, but it would be of no use, as the path turned and curved endlessly.

Fortunately a hanging branch with leaves becoming limp in the day's heat showed her that she was once more on the blazed track. She was heading for the forest. She stopped, and slipping past the pony retraced her steps, searching for the spot where she had gone astray. She came to the forked point, and discovered that she had taken the left branch when she ought to have followed the right. She rectified her mistake, and was relieved to see one of the scraps of paper lying on the trail dropped as she walked behind the fugitive. Her progress was necessarily slow, and she blamed herself more than once for not having strewn

more of the guiding white fragments. They were easier to see than the broken twigs.

At the end of an anxious twenty minutes she emerged from the jungle upon an open space covered with grass. To her great relief she recognized the familiar waterhole at a little distance, and between her and the pool was the path she knew and had left when the stranger asked her to come with him. The breeze blew refreshingly in her face as soon as she was out on the patana; and the sight of the wind-ruffled pool was reassuring and satisfactory.

She mounted the pony, and quickened her pace. As she rode her mind was no longer occupied to the exclusion of every other thought with the intricacies of the track. She was able to centre it on the difficulties presented by her strange adventure. What course ought she to pursue?

If only Geoffry were within reach she might safely place the matter in his hands and shift all responsibility to his shoulders. The more she considered Fred as a confidant, the more dissatisfied she became. Somehow she had no faith in his judgment. He would be as kindhearted as any one could wish; but he would be even more puzzled than herself as to the best means of putting an end to the vicious persecution that was apparently going on.

Another point troubled her. She doubted if Fred could be persuaded to believe the story. She felt morally certain that he would reject it until it could be satisfactorily proved; and proof on the face of things was not possible.

There would be no difficulty in giving the stranger shelter whether his story was true or not. The trouble would come as soon as Gay wanted to take action in order to discover the identity of the German agent. She had given her promise not to disclose the story that had been poured into her ears that afternoon. She had made the promise without thinking of the possible consequences, half convinced that she would have to listen to some rambling tale that was founded on an hallucination. It was only when she had heard his clear succinct account that she rejected the idea of insanity.

The man was sane enough in the main; but his awful experience, to which an empty eye-socket testified in so terrible a manner, had upset his nerves and produced what

was recognized in the military hospital as shell-shock or war-shock.

She knew enough of shell-shock to be aware that extreme care was needed in guarding the patient against excitement of any kind. This relentless pursuit which seemed to be going on—if she might judge by the slip of paper he had shown her—was extremely bad for him. It increased the complaint and aggravated it. No rest cure was possible until the fugitive's mind was entirely set at rest.

Gay remembered that although she had promised to keep the story secret of his experiences in Germany, she had made no promise concerning his existence in the forest. She felt that she was at liberty to speak of having met him without committing any breach of faith; and she might mention that he was to all appearance destitute, and in bad health.

The poor creature wanted clothes, and boots, and a sun hat quite as much as he wanted quinine. He also required nourishing English food in place of the millet. If he was to regain his health and nerve, it was imperative that he should have a good roof over his head and live away from the damp and miasma of the jungle. By day it might be all right; but after nightfall it was bad even for the hardiest of English constitutions.

She could not make up her mind what course to take, and she reached the stables in a state of indecision. She felt she was not ready to make any statement. Her interview with the man had ended abruptly, and he had disappeared before she had thought to ask his name, or to beg him to make another appointment. She blamed herself for her carelessness. Her previous experience of this trick of vanishing without warning should have prepared her. Now, if she desired to see him, she did not know which way to turn to find him.

The old snake-charmer denied all knowledge of the Englishman's presence in the forest, even though he was giving the wanderer a safe shelter in the privacy of his own dwelling. On every side difficulty presented itself of communicating with the fugitive again. Yet it was imperative that she should see him before the wet season set in.

As she walked from the stable to the bungalow, she

heard her name called. She turned off into the garden where the children were romping wildly. In their midst was Dr. Caversham with Catherine.

"I am delighted with Betty. She looks ever so much better," he said.

"Thanks to Nurse Catherine," responded Gay.

Caversham glanced at Catherine, and they both smiled rather self-consciously.

"Shall we confess?" he said. Then, turning to Gay, he continued: "I suppose your brother won't mind giving her away; and do you think that your cook will be able to make a cake?"

Gay's hand went out with warm sympathy. What she might have said was lost in the sound of Betty's shrill voice—

"I like cake! Oh! Gay dear! do give us some more cake. I'm quite well enough to eat it now."

"I like it white," remarked another child, who, with several of her companions, had been jealous of Betty's invalidism and all its attentions and privileges.

"No; pink! let's have it pink, like the one we had in the forest," cried Norman, who worshipped Billy.

"—where my geegee lives!" added Billy; and, feeling that he was not holding the attention of the grown-ups sufficiently to his liking, he continued: "Doctor! Doctor! This is how my geegee looks!"

He shut one eye and the rest of the children followed his example.

"Poor geegee!" said Gay, gazing at the child with a sudden illumination of the mind. She had met Billy's geegee that very afternoon. Seeing the children imitating him gave her something of a shock. "Aren't you sorry for him, Billy, with only one eye? You ought not to be so unkind as to make fun of him."

The many pairs of eyes became normal at this reproof, and were fixed upon her with the inevitable question born in every child.

"Why?"

"Did you ever find out the identity of Billy's mysterious one-eyed friend?" asked Caversham.

Gay did not answer; but Catherine hastened to say that nothing had been heard of him.

"I suppose that no Englishman is missing," said Gay, with an indifference she was far from feeling. "No planter, nor any European loafer, is in trouble and likely to be wandering in the jungle?"

"No one is missing," replied Caversham. "And it is not in the least likely that one of our colonists is in trouble and under the necessity of running away from justice. No; this one-eyed geegee that Billy talks about is a Sinhali, I feel sure, who intended to claim a reward."

"The newspapers would soon let us know if any criminal was missing," added Catherine.

Gay made no answer. The tea-bell rang for the drawing-room tea. Caversham, with Catherine, followed their hostess and walked slowly towards the house, leaving the ayahs in charge. They found Helen at the tea-table. She had already poured out a cup for herself.

"I didn't wait," she said by way of apology. "I promised to go and meet Mr. Goldenham."

"Where is he?" inquired Gay, who had supposed that her brother was busy in his office room.

"Soon after you left he received a note from Miss Campbell, asking him to go over at once. She was in trouble."

"Did Nellie say what it was?" asked Gay.

"No; she only begged him to come as quickly as he could."

"But I had the pony!" cried Gay, with concern. "Surely Fred didn't attempt to walk! It is much too far for him; it is between three and four miles, and the sun was very hot in the middle of the day."

"He said he would call in at Wanna Wella on his way and borrow Mr. Charnes' horse."

"That's all right," said Gay, with relief. "I wonder what is wrong with Nellie's affairs. Something to do with her new chicken run, perhaps."

"Possibly she has cut down her father's pet tea bushes and is frightened of the consequences," suggested Helen, with an amused smile.

Pedro entered the drawing-room with a note. It was in Fred's handwriting. He presented it to Gay, who opened it.

"Oh!" she cried, after reading it. "Oh! poor little Nellie!"

"What is it? What's the matter?" asked the others in a breath, startled by Gay's exclamation.

"A letter from Fred; he says that he will not be home till to-morrow; he will be in by lunch-time."

"Why?" asked Helen, quickly, her brows drawing together in an unconscious frown.

"Nellie Campbell's father is dead."

Gay handed her the letter. It contained only those two bits of information.

"I wonder how it has happened; it must be from an accident of some sort," said Catherine.

"Or has the rioting begun?" asked Gay, looking at Caversham.

"We shall hear to-morrow. I am afraid it seems like it," replied Caversham.

Helen said nothing. She left the room, carrying the letter with her. Gay's glance followed her; but Catherine and the Doctor were already moving towards the garden, which they would have to themselves as soon as the children's tea-bell rang.

CHAPTER XXI

FRED returned from the Campbells' house on the following day in time for lunch. The post not having arrived, he was closely questioned as to news from Colombo as well as Kandy.

He had very little more to add to what he had written in his note of the previous evening. Two wires had been received. The first was to Nellie herself from Geoffry announcing Campbell's death; which news Fred had sent on to his sister in his letter.

"Wasn't Nellie frightfully upset?" asked Gay.

"She was; but she is a wonderful girl," he replied, in warm admiration. "She pulled herself together splendidly after the first short breakdown, and never lost her head. She gave me clear directions how to carry on in her absence, even down to details about her new fowl-run; and the food that is to be served out each day for her pigs and fowls; for the pony and the cows. I am to see the creatures fed. I didn't know that she had so much grit in her."

Gay and Catherine agreed heartily in his eulogy; Helen remained silent.

"When did Miss Campbell leave?" she asked presently.

"We had dinner about six; and she got away between seven and eight, in plenty of time to catch the night mail. I wired to Geoffry to meet her and to secure a room somewhere. I had a reply from him which arrived just after Nellie left."

"Did he tell you anything more about the riot?" asked Gay, whose mind dwelt on Geoffry and the possible danger he might be running in performing his duty as a special constable.

"Nothing concerning the riots. We shall have the news presently in the paper. The tappal cooly is late this morning. There was a little more news about Campbell in Geoff's wire. Campbell was knocked on the head by Asseri, the headman of the Sinhali village on the other side of the hill behind us. Asseri was arrested."

"That was the man of whom Mr. Campbell was speaking the day he and Miss Campbell came here to tennis," said Helen. "If you remember, Mr. Goldenham, he was talking about him as we walked down to the courts. Asseri had done something to annoy him—incited the Gipsies to trespass on his estate, wasn't it? When is Miss Campbell coming back?"

"Not till after the funeral. Campbell is to be buried at Kandy. Meanwhile I am going to run the estate," replied Fred, gratified at the thought of Nellie's reliance on him.

"You will have enough to do with Mr. Campbell's large place on your hands as well as your own," remarked Helen.

"And you will want the pony," added Gay, thinking of her rides up into the forest.

"Nellie begged me to use hers," replied Fred. "It gets too beany without exercise. Geoffry's horse must have a turn as well; so I shall not be wanting our own if you're thinking of your afternoon rides, Gay."

The postbag arrived with the letters and paper. The little company drew close to Fred as he opened and read out the news after distributing the letters.

The rioting that had taken place at Colombo and at Kandy, as well as in several of the more important villages between those two towns, was on a large scale. It showed that some master mind had been at work to organize it. It was termed a rebellion, since it was not merely a racial affair between the Sinhalese and the Muhammadans, but a definite rising against the British Government. To a certain extent it was veiled by the animosity shown against the Moormen; but this was only an excuse and a cover for a much deeper purpose.

The authorities were prepared, however. In spite of inferiority of numbers of troops, police, and English specials,

they remained masters of the situation. The riots broke out simultaneously with murder and arson until the English appeared on the scenes. Then the hostility of the Sinhalese was at once diverted and directed against the Europeans.

There was the same feature about every outbreak. The Sinhalese were in possession of a large quantity of arms of all kinds and of money to purchase banners and lanterns for processional demonstrations against the Government. There also seemed to be an unaccountable supply of fiery arrack which served to inflame the people and cause them to lose their heads.

Geoffry's letter, the third Gay had received, was shorter than the others. He had little time for writing, he said. He set her mind at rest about his own safety and gave her further details of Campbell's death. Campbell was on duty in the principal street of Kandy. He recognized Asseri in the crowd. He was inciting the people to violence. The man had been drinking and was highly excited. Campbell denounced him as a truculent fellow and ordered his arrest.

Before the police constables could secure him, Asseri attacked Campbell with sudden fury and felled him to the ground with a club. Death must have been instantaneous, as one of the formidable spikes of the club penetrated his brain.

It was a cruel murder, for at the time there was no actual conflict in progress. It was, however, the signal for the attack to begin. The Sinhalese looted and burned the houses of the Moormen and killed the terrified unarmed inhabitants as they tried to escape.

The troops fired on the crowd. Several Sinhalese were also killed; many were wounded and many more were arrested. Order was at last restored, and Geoffry expressed a hope that the rebellion was crushed out. He would have to remain in Kandy a few days longer, for, though the trouble seemed to be over, there were still signs here and there of unrest.

The letter went on to personal matters that concerned no one but himself and Gay.

She closed the sheets with a sigh. No hope of finding help and counsel from Geoffry in her perplexity. She could not write out the story with all its details; it was

too long. It was necessary to wait till he returned. Yet action of some kind was imperative—if only she could find the fugitive and get on speaking terms with him again.

During the previous night she had had time to think over the situation. The same two points that she was considering on her way back from the forest troubled her more than a little.

How was she to provide the fugitive with clothes, medicine, and proper food? and how was she to remove the terrible mental strain under which he was suffering?

It was imperative that he should have some sort of a shelter where he could be assured in his own mind that he would be protected from the deadly assault he believed to be hanging over him. His mind must be set at rest on that point, or the disorder of the nervous system could not be cured.

But no action was possible until she had established communication with him again. This must be done as speedily as possible; for until it was done she was unable to supply him with any of the material comforts he so much needed. It was again a case of "wait and see," whether she liked it or not.

She debated within herself whether she should go to Fred with her story. Fred was already fully occupied and could do no more than she herself had done in the matter; even if he could have found the time, she could not say where the stranger was to be found. Her brother had no opportunity just now to help in the search for one whom he would believe was a tramp and a loafer hiding away from the police.

The most likely place to come across the wanderer was in the vicinity of the Gipsy's camp. Here again she encountered difficulties. The old snake-charmer had moved his camp, and in less than a week he would be moving again, since he never stayed long in one place.

After leaving the cliff above Asseri's village, Dakshi had given Gay to understand that he was coming over on this side of the ridge; but she had seen nothing of him or his tribe, except on the occasion when she had met the Englishman and immediately afterwards the Gipsy who had denied all knowledge of him.

The Gipsy lairs were as puzzling to discover as the lair of the jackal and the sambur. Dakshi and his people knew the caves and secluded glens all over the hills. They had penetrated to recesses that had never been seen by other eyes than their own. They were more at home in the jungle than the Sinhalese woodmen.

Gay was familiar with the track leading up to the water-hole, and she also knew the two branches of the path, the one to Devala and the other to the elephant rocks and on beyond to the cliff; but the depths of the forest, with its network of game trails, was unexplored ground into which she had never dared to venture without a guide.

In the afternoon she took the children into the forest, and they had tea at the picnic spot, to the great delight of the little people. While Catherine and Helen made tea, Gay wandered away along the tracks she knew, hoping that either the snake-charmer or his unknown guest might appear.

Not a sight nor a sign of them did she have; nor could she detect any indication that the new camping-ground was near. She scanned the undergrowth closely, hoping to see one or other of the familiar figures; but neither was visible. It was with a feeling of intense disappointment that she returned to the slab of rock where the tea was spread.

The sun was not far from his setting when the baskets were packed and the party set out for home. She lingered behind the children till the soft tropical twilight fell like a cloak of silk over forest, garden, and bungalow.

Friday and Saturday passed in the same way. The post brought her the daily letter, and the newspaper gave further information about the rebellion which was at an end. She managed to ride up into the jungle on both days; but drew a blank. She had no visitors on Saturday. The men were all away, and their wives did not care to take the long walk or ride without their husbands.

On Sunday morning Gay held her little service of hymns and prayers for the children, the church being too far off to attend. Fred was at home all day taking a much-needed rest. The extra work was beginning to tell upon him. She was occupied with her own thoughts, and had

never been accustomed to interfere with the actions of an elder brother. She made no fuss over his fatigue, but left him to rest as he chose, reading in an armchair or strolling about the garden, which was beginning to feel the want of rain.

Over his food she was careful and solicitous. Cups of chicken broth with toast and a little claret found their way into his office between meals at the hands of a silent, attentive servant who knew his business. The children were kept away from Fred's side of the house, and Gay felt that nothing was left undone that a sister could do.

It was Helen who supplemented Gay's good offices with the sympathetic smile of welcome, the occasional low inquiry as to his health, the little attentions and services that are so welcome to a man from any one but his sister.

After the big breakfast on Sunday and the arrival of the postbag, which now contained a budget for Nurse Catherine as well as Gay, the latter slipped off into the forest.

She had very little hope of seeing the stranger. Her chief object in seeking the company of her silent yet eloquent friends, the trees, was to find undisturbed solitude wherein she might enjoy the letter, which was becoming each day as necessary to her happiness as the sunshine and the pure sweet air of the mountains.

She passed the familiar spot where she had sat with Geoffry and walked on to the picnic place. At about twenty yards distant from the slab of rock on which the tea was always spread for the children was an open glade with a break in the dense undergrowth. Over a low leafy barrier the eye could see the opposite side of the valley. The roof of the Wanna Wella bungalow was visible, broad and widely stretched and buried up to its eaves in brilliant variegated foliage and flowering shrubs.

Behind Wanna Wella rose a jungle-crowned ridge. Lower down beyond Wanna Wella were the smooth acres of Campbell's estate. The bungalow was not visible.

Gay seated herself on a boulder where she had often sat before. Her eyes rested on the bungalow buried in its luxuriant garden. She was thinking of it as her future home. The prospect was pleasant. Geoffry had bestowed

as much care on the place as she and Fred had devoted to Toona Kelli. There would be very little to change. The drawing-room was perhaps a wee bit stiff, the result of its being left to servants. With plenty of flower vases, new books and magazines, her work-table and writing bureau, it should rival in comfort the drawing-room at Toona Kelli.

Then the nice, large open hall, where Geoffry sat and smoked and read, came into her mind. It was something that their own bungalow did not possess. The long, badly lighted passage at Toona Kelli could not be converted into a lounge under any circumstances. True, she had a better verandah than that at Wanna Wella; but when it rained the open verandah was damp and draughty and had to be abandoned.

And rain was not far off. She lifted her eyes to a magnificent white-headed cloud that seemed to be peering over the ridge at the back of Wanna Wella. It was a thunderstorm that was already at work, shedding its moisture in the valley beyond that ran parallel to their own valley. Probably the storm would gather overhead before long and bring the rain needed for the garden and the tea.

Suddenly her attention was riveted by a familiar sound close at hand. It was the call of the barbet from a bush behind her. The sound came at a time—as before—when the birds should have been silent.

She replied with the same notes and slowly turned, slipping round on the boulder without rising from her seat. Her eyes swept over the jungle at the edge of the glade and were arrested by the sight of her strange forest acquaintance.

He stood with his back against a tree-trunk; and unless she had searched for him, he might easily have escaped her observation. They looked at each other for some seconds without speaking. Gay was sensible of a feeling of intense relief at seeing him there. He had not been overtaken by the fate he so much dreaded. The nervousness had not abated. With a turn of the head to right and left he cautiously came forward.

“I want some more quinine,” he said abruptly.

"You shall have some," replied Gay. "I will bring it to-morrow at this time."

"Not to-morrow; I have enough to last over to-morrow," he replied hastily.

"Yes; I shall come to-morrow and bring you some more food."

"What is to-day?" he asked.

"This is Sunday, our day of rest."

"Is it? I have lost count of days and dates," he said in a tone of despair that touched her heart with intense pity. "It used to be our day for visitors. Have you any visitors at your bungalow?"

"No; Saturday is my At Home day. I like to have Sunday quiet. My brother wants the rest."

"Your brother, not your husband?"

"I am not married. My name is Gay Goldenham. I want to know something: where is the Gipsy camp?"

He hesitated and became suspicious at once. Then he pointed over his shoulder towards the hill behind him.

"Higher up; look! there is the path. It is two miles away."

"Can I find you there?" she asked.

"No; the Gipsies are moving again."

"Where are they going next?"

"Beyond the elephant rocks deep in the jungle. The girl Maridi is to be married to a snake-charmer, one of these travelling fellows. I don't want to see him; I can't trust any stranger."

"Will you be at the new camp?"

"I don't know what to do. I dare not leave the protection of the old man and his snakes; at the same time a wedding orgy is not a pleasant affair."

"I do wish you would come home with me," said Gay, breaking into an abrupt entreaty. "Look at that cloud over there! You know the jungle well enough to understand what that means. Come out of the cold and damp that will soon be upon us and enjoy the warm, dry bungalow, with the wood fires, the comfortable beds, the good food and clothing we can give you. Oh! do come home with me and put an end to this miserable life!"

As she spoke he drew nearer. A great longing seized him; the invitation was strongly attractive.

"It is hard, very hard not to be able to say yes."

"Why shouldn't you say yes?"

"Ah! you don't understand! My head counsels one thing; but my body, my sinking heart, my trembling limbs refuse to follow the counsels of my reason. I am still pursued by the relentless fiend."

"Did he follow you that day I met you in the jungle?"

"No; I was followed, but it was by the old snake-charmer, who never lets me out of his sight, so faithful is he. When my heart fails me and I have a trembling fit—the fits take me unawares—he comes to me and calms me; calls me his son, and lets the good snakes crawl round me. He vows by all the gods of the cobras that no harm shall happen to me."

"How was it that he befriended you in this way?" she asked.

"Years and years ago—it seems like an existence in another life—I took his part. He was accused of murdering a Sinhali with whom he had had a quarrel. Gipsies never commit murder; and, though they are born thieves, they never rob with violence. If they want to get rid of an enemy they have their own peculiar way of bringing about an accident of some sort. I proved the old man's innocence. He was discharged from custody and his gratitude is lasting."

"I have told you my name. Tell me yours," said Gay, rising from her seat at last with gentle movements.

He shook his head and closed his fever-burned lips firmly.

"Why not? No harm can come of letting me, an Englishwoman, know your name."

"Promise! swear that you will tell no one."

"I promise," said Gay, after a scarcely perceptible pause.

Still he did not speak. His attention was drawn off to something that he distrusted. He began to tremble. It was a pitiful sight, and Gay was again moved more than a little. She came close to him, put an arm round his poor thin shoulders, and covered his shaking hand with her own firm fingers.

"Be quiet, now! Have courage! There is nothing to fear. You are quite safe. Come! cheer up and be a man!" she said.

He lifted her hand to his hollow cheek and laid his face upon the back of it, as Billy had done more than once when he wanted to propitiate and find comfort.

"I will try! indeed, I will try!" he said, with pathetic contrition.

"I tell you there is nothing to fear," she repeated, with as much authority as she could put into her tone. "Come home with me now, this very minute, and I promise faithfully that my brother and I will keep you safe."

She drew him with gentle force along the game trail leading to the picnic rock. His knees, weak with fever and bad food, shook under him. She felt as if she were helping an invalid, who, after a long spell of bed, attempts to walk for the first time.

They reached the path where the track to the picnic place joined it. As bad luck would have it, a native with a bundle of firewood on his head appeared in the far distance. He was moving towards them in the jog-trot of the human beast of burden, his eyes on the ground and his senses asleep.

Gay's companion darted back into the jungle. Prepared for some such movement on his part she did not relax her hold, but allowed herself to be drawn back too.

"Don't be afraid; it is only one of our men from the lines, who has been gathering wood."

They were completely hidden from view; but the fugitive's nerves were once more upset. He clung to her with the terror of a child.

"Save me! save me!" he cried, in a stifled voice. "Oh! God of mercy, protect me!"

Gay waited till the man carrying the firewood had passed and disappeared down the path.

"Now we can move on," she said again, drawing him along with her.

He resisted this time, and looked at her with distended eye and dazed expression.

"I must go back to the camp," he muttered.

"You will come with me where you can be properly taken care of."

"No! no! not there! I must find Dakshi and his cobras. No! no! I dare not!" he cried, standing with more firmness than she had thought he could exert in his weakness.

"Don't! oh! please don't talk like that! You are an Englishman! Act up to your birth, and be brave!" she urged. It made her shudder to see the collapse of his courage and spirit; it hurt her racial pride.

Other people besides Gay Goldenham have felt acutely the terrible collapse of brave men under shell-shock. She feared that he might break away any moment. His madness seemed to give him back his strength.

"If you must go, tell me your name first and promise to meet me here to-morrow at half-past two."

"To-morrow at half-past two," he repeated, listening intently. He tried to loosen her grip.

"Your name! your name!" she repeated in desperation, feeling that she could not hold him much longer.

"Swear that you will tell no one."

"I swear!" cried Gay, recklessly, as she clung to his arm.

"Don't you know me? I am Noel Loveden!" and he wrenched himself free, with a shuddering cry, and fled into the forest.

CHAPTER XXII

FOR some minutes Gay stood as though shell-shocked herself. "*Noel Loveden!*" It was the name of Helen's husband; of Billy's and Betty's father. Was it possible that this could be the man?

She had heard all about Loveden's death from Helen herself, and had seen the letters from the War Office reporting the event. It was a year and a half since he had been declared dead. His will had been proved, and Helen's position as Loveden's widow and executrix established.

The thought that it might be Noel Loveden himself come back from the dead staggered her. She called: "Mr. Loveden! Mr. Loveden! I have something to tell you!"

Her cry was in vain. Even if her voice reached his ears, her words conveyed no meaning to his stricken brain. Then came the doubt as to the truth of his statement. It was more difficult to disbelieve than to believe. She had heard of so many strange things happening in this terrible war. Men reported dead or missing had been discovered alive. Some were suffering from shell-shock like this stranger, and had forgotten everything including their names. Some had been taken prisoners, and, under the influence of broken spirits and bad treatment, had made no effort to communicate with their friends and relatives. They seemed to prefer to leave their belongings under the impression that they were dead.

Gay began to move homewards. When she arrived at the log where she had often sat, she could not resist the invitation it seemed to offer. Just at this point the forest showed its most fascinating aspect. A rift in the foliage admitted the sun on the opposite side of the path and illuminated the beautiful ferns scattered profusely beneath

the undergrowth. The shrubs responded to their bath of sunshine, and tossed a wealth of blossom to the breeze that came in with the warm rays. Butterflies, birds, mottled lizards and metallic insects basked in the heat.

Another thought assailed Gay as she sat there. What was she to do with regard to keeping the stranger's secret? He had made his impetuous demand for secrecy before telling her his name; and she had acceded to it just as she had consented to secrecy over his adventures in Germany.

Helen Loveden must be told.

On the other hand, what if his claim to be Noel Loveden was false?

Helen would naturally demand a sight of this man who said he was her husband. She would communicate with the police, and never rest till the fugitive was hunted down to his secret hiding-place. The pursuit in itself would be sufficient to send him completely off his head, and turn him into a hopeless lunatic or a suicide. At present he had his lucid intervals, as she could see for herself. The cure lay in the prolongation of these intervals. In an atmosphere of security and peace the same interval might be prolonged until the frenzied fits of panic were eliminated. If he would come voluntarily to the bungalow and place himself under Helen's care, the cure might be effected. It was a serious responsibility that had descended on Gay's shoulders; and her reverie finished with a fresh determination to make another attempt to bring him to the house.

The sun suddenly disappeared. She glanced up. One of the white-headed clouds with its innumerable curves like the rounded bubbles on soapy froth, had crept up high enough to cover the sun.

She rose from her seat, knowing how quickly the tropical thunderstorm can gather and burst. The forest was no place to stay in when the lightning ran by a hundred streams over the face of the grey rain-laden vapour. The safest shelter was the bungalow.

Some one approached from the direction of the estate. He was walking rapidly towards her. It was John Smith. She greeted him as he came up.

"Where are you off in such a hurry?" she asked.

"To Asseri's village. He is in trouble. Silly fellow!

attacking Mr. Campbell as he did. I don't think he meant to kill him. He was so incensed that he did not know what he was doing."

"Where you at Kandy at the time?"

"No; I had gone down to Colombo—on business connected with my cargo of snakes and wild animals. I think I will rest for a few minutes if you will allow me. I have a long walk in front of me."

He seated himself on the log, and Gay sat down by his side to have a little chat. She hoped that he would be able to tell her more news about the riots.

"There was trouble in Colombo, the paper said. Did you see anything of it?" she asked.

"Nothing at all. I passed through an excited crowd round the Maradana station in Colombo; but like all these Eastern crowds, there was plenty of talking and shouting, but no action," he replied.

"You were not afraid of being attacked and knocked on the head like Mr. Campbell?"

"I was in no danger whatever of being molested," he answered, with a suspicion of contempt in his voice. "I could have moved about among the Sinhalese and Moormen as I pleased. You know, Miss Goldenham, there is a lot of rubbish written in the newspapers about this little affair. They are making the most of it just to fill up their columns. They don't scruple to overstate the case and exaggerate the details. In the next issue they can easily contradict what they have said."

"Mr. Charnes doesn't speak at all lightly of the trouble. He thinks it serious, and so do the Kandy authorities," said Gay.

"Oh! you have heard from him, then," remarked Smith, quickly, his keen eye upon her with a searching look.

Gay was instantly on her guard, her feminine wit alert and defensive.

"Of course we have heard. When Miss Campbell was called so suddenly down to Kandy, we had to make all the arrangements for her. We wired to Mr. Charnes, as he knows her so well, and asked him to meet her and see to her comfort. He wrote to tell us of her safe arrival, and gave us more news of Mr. Campbell's murder than could be said in the telegram."

Smith's eyes never left her face as she spoke. He did not reply, but turned away when she ended as though occupied with his own thoughts. A large stag-beetle had wandered out of its ferny covert into the broad white daylight, and in its blindness it had fallen on the track. It remained by the side of the path on its back, feebly kicking its legs in the air. Smith got up from his seat and gently turned the creature over; he came back to Gay and sat down.

"You have a love for dumb things," she said, remembering the little incident connected with Nellie's pony and the syce.

"I hate to see them in distress or suffering; but I don't think I love them," he replied, and again he lapsed into abstracted silence.

"Are the riots over?"

"For the present. A large number of arrests have been made, and a quantity of weapons confiscated. These orientals are no good at this sort of thing," he continued contemptuously. "They are windbags! they collapse before authority like soap-bubbles."

"A very good thing it is so!" declared Gay, emphatically. "Then we may expect the specials back again before long."

"Those who are in a hurry to return will be released in a couple of days."

"Miss Campbell's father has been buried. She returns to-morrow."

"And Charnes may be escorting the heiress back at the same time; unless he has any private business that detains him in Kandy," he added, with a smile, as though he expected her to question him as to his meaning.

Gay resented the smile and made no response. It was strange how Smith roused in her an undefined and unreasonable antagonism. Just then she hated him; yet she had no reason for her animosity.

"By the bye, do you know where the old Gipsy has pitched his tent?" she asked, by way of turning the conversation.

"On this side of the ridge above the water-hole, not far from the path leading to Devala. Do you wish to see him?"

"Not particularly. If you remember, I gave him a kind

of invitation to come over on this side when Asseri was so disagreeable. I should like to know exactly where he is."

"Do you want to visit his camp?" he persisted.

"It might be an object for a ride."

"I advise you not to go. The camp of one of these jungle tribes is an unpleasant place as a rule. Their habits leave much to be desired. Besides, they are moving again at once, to-day unless I am mistaken. A marriage is to take place."

"Why should they move for that?"

"Don't you know how they celebrate their marriages and funerals? They go to a remote spot and have a big drink. Every one belonging to the camp, children included, gets blind drunk. No one remains sober but the donkeys and the snakes. The orgy occupies two days. At the end of the first every one will be insensible. About noon of the second day they will begin to recover. The women first; they get up and cook an evening meal. By sunset the condition of the camp will be normal."

"Do they often indulge in these tricks?"

"About twice a year; they can't afford it oftener. These are the opportunities of the police if they want to catch any of them; but the sly scoundrels know all about the ways of the police. They move their camp to some remote place, an almost inaccessible cave, or a glade in the very depths of the jungle far away from any trail used by human beings: and they baffle the police altogether."

A long, low rumble in the distance startled Gay. She looked up at the white-headed cloud in the west, and then back at the ridge. A wisp of vapour in the east lay like a filmy scarf over the jungle that clothed the mountain, a signal to the storm that it would receive a welcome.

"We shall have a shower before sunset," she said, rising from her seat. "Won't you come back to tea?"

"I can't; I must be getting on." Then, as an after-thought, he expressed his thanks for the invitation. Again he looked at her with a strange longing in his eyes. The call of duty must have been very strong to have forced him to give a refusal to what he valued highly.

"The storm will overtake you, I am afraid, before you

get to the village. If Asseri is under arrest, you won't find him there."

"It's his wife I want to see," he said shortly, as he held her hand at parting and gave it a lingering pressure.

He turned abruptly and strode up the hill. Gay stood by the old prostrate tree and gazed after him. He was going on an errand of charity, of course; to console and comfort the family of the unfortunate headman. But she noticed that he was not himself. She was sure that something had occurred to upset him. His manner was less assured; and it was free from the aggressiveness that had sometimes betrayed itself.

The thunder spoke again. She turned to go back to the bungalow. As she did so, her eyes fell on the figure of the old snake-charmer. He was standing in his favourite attitude, half hidden like a russet satyr in the foliage. A small cobra was coiled about his arm.

"Salaam, Appa!" cried Gay, in no way disconcerted. "How long have you been waiting there?"

"Now I come and now I go," he replied, returning her greeting by touching his forehead.

"You are moving into the jungle far away from this place," she said.

"Not very far, lady; but it is hidden. We make a marriage; but why does your honour ask about the doings of such poor worms as the Gipsies?"

"You have the one-eyed Englishman with you. He told me that you were his good friend. Send him to my bungalow while you make your wedding," said Gay, with sudden inspiration.

"He has too much fear."

"What if you sleep yourself after too much drinking? How can you protect him?"

"There are always the good snakes. If he stays in the hut or in the place where we go, no man can take him," replied the old man, playing with his pet.

"Better not drink arrack yourself. Let the younger men drink. You keep awake and guard Mr. Loveden."

His small beady black eyes glittered as he answered.

"Can't do that. The old man must keep up with the young. He must lead till his strength melts away."

"And then what happens to the old man?" asked Gay, wondering if they had any weird custom in the disposal of their aged and infirm who could no longer travel about from one camping-place to another.

"Then the old man hides in the mountain in the big cave that is known only to the Gipsies, and he dies."

"Is it true that the Englishman is being hunted by an enemy?" asked Gay. "Tell me the truth, master of the tribe."

"He is hunted like the stag which is followed by the tireless leopard that is always at its heels."

"It is his fancy; he dreams it," said Gay.

"It is no fancy, excellency," he replied, showing more excitement than she had seen in him before. "The enemy is always, always following. I watch; I follow too. When the enemy comes too near, I place myself and my snakes in between. The enemy does not like snakes," he concluded grimly. "And the snakes do not like him."

"Have you seen the enemy?" asked Gay.

The old man wagged his head in assent. The cobra glided through his hand to his neck. It was an uncanny sight to see the serpent clinging to his body, gripping him with its stiffened contracting curves and coils to keep itself in position.

"Who is he? What is he like?" she asked.

"The missie knows him."

"I!" exclaimed Gay in blank astonishment.

"Did he not sit and talk with your honour here just now? The shadow has not moved on the path since he left to walk up the hill."

"Impossible!" cried Gay. "The man I spoke to was Mr. Smith, the master who buys snakes of you; the owner of the Tota estate down the valley. He is kind and good, and would never hurt——"

She stopped, finding suddenly that she was talking to nobody. The foliage was undisturbed, and there was no sound of rustle among the leaves; but the old satyr, according to his custom, had vanished. His disappearance had nothing miraculous about it. Under her gaze he had withdrawn. By a slight movement he had placed a leafy screen between himself and her. The russet colour of his weatherworn body lent assistance to the manœuvre.

Whether he had left the spot or was still lurking near out of sight, she could not say. Her forest folk were queer people, with ways that were peculiarly their own; they were ways, however, that endeared them to her.

Gay waited no longer. She knew that it was as hopeless to try and recall any of them as to recall the shy jackal or the distrustful wild boar.

The storm was slowly gathering; but it would not burst yet awhile. There was no need to hurry. She strolled along, deep in thought. There were several hard nuts to crack in the subject before her. She wanted time to consider the events of the afternoon; the revelation of the stranger's identity, and the very serious charge that the snake-charmer had brought against John Smith.

As to the identity of the fugitive, she was completely puzzled. Try as she might, she could not reject it. The possibility of the man being Noel Loveden became the more convincing, the more she thought it over. But that Mr. Smith, the acquaintance of some few years past, should be Loveden's enemy was incredible. It was a false charge, the fantasy of a disordered brain. Dakshi was mistaken. Smith was known to all the planters in the valley. It was absurd, not to say unjust, to associate him with the malignant evil person Loveden described. John Smith! with his kindness to dumb creatures! relentlessly pursuing a man who never did him any harm! John Smith desirous of depriving him of his remaining eye, and leaving him blinded for life! Incredible! Impossible! The thought made her smile.

"No! no! old man! I am sorry to have to think ill of you; but you are a perverter of the truth; and what your object is in slandering Mr. Smith I cannot imagine; unless it be spite because of some hard bargain that he has driven with you over the purchase of snakes."

Having disposed of the snake-charmer's outrageous statement as entirely false, she dismissed it from her mind and went back to the contemplation of a matter that was far more serious; her duty to Helen and her husband, whose identity she was disposed to accept. She was also inclined to believe in the terrible experiences that had befallen him in Germany. The loss of the eye testified to some horrible

accident, and his nervous condition had to be accounted for. It might well be the result of the shocking treatment he alleged that he had received. The story of his persecution by some German agent, and of John Smith being the man in question, was asking too much of her credulity.

The wisp of vapour that had wreathed the mountain had gathered sufficient volume to be able to reply to the monster white-headed cloud. Its colour had deepened to a slate grey, and it had lost its light filmy character. The trees, with their rounded crowns of foliage, grew by contrast a lighter and more vivid green. The wind increased and ruffled the leaves beating them up so that they showed their pale under-surfaces.

Birds, disturbed in their feeding, soared up out of the jungle, threw themselves joyously into the fitful blasts like strong swimmers breasting the oncoming waves, and allowed themselves to be carried with excited cries high up above the forest trees. Gusts of cool wind blew down into the jungle and penetrated to the carpet of ferns, bringing the fresh smell of rain that set every leaf quivering on its stem with eager anticipation. Dead leaves that had hung motionless on their boughs out of reach of the steady morning and evening breezes were caught in the searching gusts and floated to earth in spiral curves. All insect life disappeared into its own chosen shelters, where the big heavy drops of the tropical downpour could not reach.

Presently the path Gay trod would be a miniature waterway, and the song of the wind in the trees would be accompanied by the chorus of a thousand newly formed rivulets pouring in streaks of foam down the face of the mountain.

As Gay reached the bungalow, her brother and Helen came in from the garden.

"We're going to have some rain," remarked Gay.

"We want it; it will do the tea no end of good," replied Fred.

"Where are the children?" asked Gay.

"We sent them all indoors five minutes ago," replied Helen. Then, turning to Fred, she said, "Won't you come and have tea with us in the drawing-room?"

"I will if you ask me," he answered.

Something in their tone arrested Gay's attention. It

was different from their usual manner of speaking. She followed them in. Betty and Billy and some of the older children were assembled with Catherine round the tea-table. It was a Sunday treat to have tea with the grown-ups. The smallest, not being able to feed themselves without assistance from the ayahs, were in the dining-room waiting for their tea to be brought.

Catherine rose when she had had her second cup.

"I'll go and look after the little ones, if you will excuse me," she said. "Come along, Billy, and the rest of you. You've had enough tea here ; it's all finished. If you want any more to eat and drink, we must get it in the dining-room."

They trailed out, and Gay was left with Fred and Helen.

"Gay," said Fred, presently. "I want to tell you something. Helen has consented to be my wife. We shall not make it a long engagement. We are going to be very happy, she and I." He looked at her with an expression on his good-looking but rather simple face with a dawning of devotion that sent a knife through Gay's heart. She could only stare at him, and then at Helen in perplexity and embarrassment. After a few seconds she found her voice.

"Oh ! Fred ! Helen ! Impossible—— !"

Further speech was cut short by a blinding flash of lightning, followed immediately by a shattering roar as of sheets of brass being rent asunder. The storm had burst after the manner of the tropics ; and it was followed by the frightened screams of the children in the dining-room. They claimed all the attention of the three loving women to whose care they had been confided by their parents.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE storm lasted three hours. It was in reality a succession of cloud bursts. The rain fell with the rush of a waterspout and rattled on the wooden shingles of the roof. Being the first disturbance of the weather, and a forerunner of the south-west monsoon, the lightning and thunder were exceptionally severe. The children needed all the attention of their elders to keep up their courage as the bluish light of the electricity shone vividly through the overlapping wooden slats of the roof and the thunder roared from one point of the compass to another.

By the time the late dinner was ready the storm was over. It ceased as suddenly as it began. The children were all in bed, dropping off to sleep with the fatigue of their fears and excitement.

Gay assisted Helen and Catherine in the disrobing and tucking up of the little people in their mosquito curtains. Billy put his arm round Gay's neck and whispered—

"Poor geegee! I didn't mean to laugh at him! Do you think he will be very frightened at the thunder?"

"I don't know, darling! I hope he has found a shelter among the rocks."

What mysterious influence was at work to bring the child's thoughts to his unknown father? Loveden had never for a moment been out of her own mind since he had fled into the forest. When the rain fell in torrents, she had more than once caught herself wondering if he had been able to keep dry. To be exposed to the wet and the cold that came with it would mean a sharp attack of fever. While her fingers were busy over the folding and sorting into their separate baskets of the tiny dainty garments of her little visitors, her mind was busy with the strange complications

that had arisen through Fred's proposal to Helen and her acceptance of him. It increased Gay's responsibility, and placed her in a serious dilemma.

Argue as she might with herself about her difficulties and beliefs, one fact faced her steadily and relentlessly. She must disclose the secret of the forest to her brother that very evening. She must not sleep till she had told her tale, in spite of having given her word that she would keep Loveden's secret.

She had to consider how far she had pledged herself. It was the story of how he lost his eye and of the pursuit of the enemy that she had promised in the first place not to reveal. She could not remember having promised to keep his existence altogether secret; but he had exacted secrecy over his name. This she would be forced to disregard. She was morally bound to tell Fred now. The unexpected march of circumstances had forced her hand and left her no alternative. That very night she must speak. There was no question of waiting for another interview with Loveden. She must take action at once and inform him of what she had done when she carried the quinine to him the next day. And she must convince him somehow that his wife and children were at the bungalow looking for his coming.

Had he not disappeared the moment after telling her who he was, she would have given him the information that very afternoon. She would have told him that the child he carried so thoughtlessly into the jungle, and whom he had forsaken as he had forsaken Gay herself in his panic over his own safety, was no other than his own son.

She would confess frankly that she had partly broken her promise; that she had mentioned something about the incident to her brother: but she would not give any reason for this. It would be impossible to drop any hint that Helen was contemplating a second marriage, her choice being Gay's own brother. She would also be able to plead with Loveden that Helen had a right to be informed of his safety and of his return to the island.

At dinner they were all unusually silent. Fred and Helen conversed with their eyes after the manner of lovers; and this fact, which was obvious to Gay, made her feel

uncomfortable. Catherine was absorbed in her own happiness, and seemed to notice nothing. Gay was thankful that no comment was made on the little she herself ate; and no questions were asked as to her walk before tea. Lovers, she thought, were luckily insensible to things that were passing around them.

As soon as dinner was over she asked Fred if he could give her a few minutes; she wished to discuss something with him.

"If it is about my engagement to Helen, I should like her to be present," he said stiffly.

Although Gay had done little more than gasp and exclaim the one word "impossible" before she was interrupted by the bursting of the storm, her tone and the expression she had used had been sufficient to indicate to Fred that she was not altogether pleased with the prospect.

It was not like Gay to be unsympathetic in any matter that concerned him; and her attitude had troubled him ever since he had told her of his engagement to Helen.

Gay hesitated in replying to his request that Helen might be present, and she glanced at her doubtfully.

On Mrs. Loveden's face rested a shadow of resentment. She recognized an indefinable opposition in that one word that had escaped from Gay in her surprise and consternation. This was enough to decide Gay. She must consider her brother's false position before everything else. If need be, Helen's feelings must be sacrificed. The truth at all costs must be told. This sense of duty made Gay's task a little easier; yet she would have much preferred to have a talk with Fred without Helen's presence.

"Of course what I have to say concerns Helen quite as much as it concerns you; but it would be best if she were not present. You can tell her all about it afterwards."

Catherine was in the room, and could not help hearing the conversation. She came up to Gay and said in a low tone:

"I am going to my room to write to Dr. Caversham; so you will find the drawing-room empty."

She slipped away well content to have the evening to herself. It would be a thick budget that the post coolly would take away the next morning.

The lovers looked at each other ; and Fred, as if in obedience to an unspoken desire on Helen's part, said—

"I wish Mrs. Loveden to be present. It is only fair to her that, if her name is to be mentioned, she should hear exactly what you have to say."

He linked his arm in Helen's and led the way to the drawing-room. Gay followed. They seated themselves by the fire. Helen taking a corner of the sofa and Fred his usual chair near the little table that held his cigarettes. Gay occupied a low stool on the hearthrug. It was a relief to find that the two did not seem anxious to sit together. The fire blazed cheerily. The rain had brought a coolness that made the flaming logs welcome.

"Now, Gay, out with it!" said Fred, as he took up a cigarette, which, however, he did not light.

Gay glanced at Helen, whose eyes avoided her and were turned upon the fire. Still the sister hesitated to throw her bomb.

"Come, tell us what you have got to say, and let's have done with it," he said, in a more encouraging tone than he had used before.

"I have made a discovery, a—a—wonderful discovery ; an almost incredible discovery in the forest," she said, with an unusual gravity.

"Oh! is that all?" cried Helen, with a little laugh. "Really, Gay! you looked so solemn that I thought you were going to object to have me as a sister-in-law because I was a widow ; or because I am not a rich woman. Anyway, I am self-supporting, and the children are provided for."

"I never gave a thought to your position nor to your means," said Gay, with difficulty repressing her annoyance at the veiled accusation that was wrapped in the words.

"I knew I must be mistaken ; you have always been so friendly," replied Helen, hastily, seeing that she had struck a wrong note and anxious to propitiate rather than offend.

"Tell us about your discovery, Gay, and how it affects us," said Fred, smoothly. It was evident that he had no suspicion that his position was insecure as Helen's accepted lover.

"The discovery I have made will prevent your marriage,

Helen : I have met your husband, Noel Loveden. He is alive and hiding in the jungle."

Helen gave a little cry, and sank back limply upon the sofa cushions. Fred's jaw dropped. He sat bolt upright and stared at Gay in amazement.

There was a pause, during which Fred brought his practical, unimaginative mind to bear upon the startling announcement. It seemed to him incredible, the fairy tale of some one who was trying to impose on his sister's credulity.

"How do you know that it was Noel Loveden? You have never seen him, and you can't know him by sight."

"He told me he was Noel Loveden."

"Did he give any satisfactory proof that his statement was true?"

"He had no evidence to show; I did not ask him for any. When I inquired who he was, he gave that name."

"What was the man like?" asked Helen, who was white from the shock of Gay's announcement, and the tumult of emotion that it had suddenly aroused.

"He is tall and gaunt, with a thin face and sunken cheeks. He has a beard, and has lost one eye—in the war."

"That's not the description of my poor Noel!" cried Helen, with an hysterical laugh that made Fred look at her with apprehension. "He was not a scarecrow, such as you describe. Noel was square-built, not stout exactly, but well-filled out. His face was clean-shaven; not thin, nor were his cheeks sunken. He was very strong. I never knew him to be ill nor to complain of fatigue. He was the handsomest, most lovable man in the district, and the best of husbands. I am afraid you have been imposed upon," she concluded, her excitement sobering down under the influence of Fred's steady gaze.

Gay noticed a faint ring of contemptuous disbelief creeping into Helen's voice as she spoke, and it kept her silent. She was never very voluble at any time, and in the face of incredulity she naturally became reserved.

"You had proof of his death from the War Office, hadn't you, Helen?" asked Fred.

"Yes: and it was sufficient to allow me to take out letters of administration of his estate."

"Where was he buried?"

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"Somewhere in France, I suppose. They never told me where. I have a horror of these war details. No doubt they did their best to bury him; but if he was blown to bits by a German shell——"

"Oh! don't go on, darling!" cried Fred, as he caught sight of the ready tears in Helen's soft brown eyes. "It is all too distressing. Why should we go into these horrid details? Loveden is dead. There is no doubt about it in my mind. However, we will soon settle the matter. This man must be confronted by some one who knew your husband. Probably it will be a great surprise for the impostor."

"Did you ever meet Noel?" asked Helen of Fred.

"Never; you lived in another valley, and out of reach of my limited visits."

"Has Mr. Charnes ever come across him?"

"Possibly they may have met in Colombo at the club. Your husband was a member, I believe." Fred turned to Gay, who had not joined in their conversation. "Where did you find this fellow?"

"In the forest, near the waterhole."

"Is he living in that part of the jungle?"

"He is with the Gipsies, I believe; although the old snake-charmer at first denied all knowledge of him."

"You say he has lost an eye. How did he lose it?"

"He gave me to understand that he lost it in the war."

"This is some criminal hiding in the jungle to escape the consequences of his crime," pronounced Helen, with conviction. "You've been taken in, Gay, by some plausible scamp. Oh! it can't be my Noel!"

Fred glanced at her with relief at her recovery from an hysterical state, and he hastened to back up her belief.

"I am afraid that is the case, Gay. Do you mind telling me the story from the beginning; how you came to meet him in the first place; how many times you have seen him; and when was the last occasion?"

Gay gave as clear an account as she was able of the three meetings she had had; but she omitted all mention of how he lost his eye and of the fugitive's suspicion that he was being followed by some unknown person with evil intent.

Now that she repeated the story aloud to other ears, it

did not sound probable that the stranger could be one of the Ceylon planters, known to a number of men still residing in the island. Glancing from one to the other of her listeners she detected an increasing incredulity on their faces, a fact that went far to shake her own belief.

"And the last time I saw him was to-day, when I was sitting on the boulder by the children's picnic place. It was then that I asked him his name; and he bolted immediately after he told me," concluded Gay.

"If it is really Loveden, why on earth doesn't he make himself known to his agents in Colombo? Why is he in hiding? and why doesn't he inquire after his wife and children?" asked Fred, with a touch of irritation.

"He suffers terribly from shell-shock—war-shock, perhaps, would be a more appropriate term," replied Gay, feeling that she was being pushed into a false position in having to make excuses for the stranger's curious behaviour.

"Did you tell him that I was here?" asked Helen. Her voice was unsteady. The thought of Noel alive had thrown her into the past, and the first love of her youth was re-asserting itself.

"No; I had no time to say a word or ask a single question. Panic seized him, and he disappeared, just like a Gipsy, in the jungle."

Fred laughed abruptly.

"Really, Gay! I thought you had more sense than to be taken in like this!" he said.

His words hurt her as well as his manner.

"You have no right to assume that I have been taken in until you see the man yourself," she said, with spirit, and feeling herself at a disadvantage in having to face a brother who did not wish to believe her statement.

"Helen will come with you to-morrow and you can introduce her," said Fred.

"He is too shy to face us," answered Gay.

"Exactly so!" rejoined Fred. "He is a wise man; he knows his own interests too well to meet us."

"Why not place the matter in the hands of the police," said Helen.

"That would scare him out of the little sense that remains to the poor fellow," returned Gay, sharply.

Here Fred interposed. He saw the futility of quarrelling over an identity that could not be established until further action was taken.

"I have to meet Nellie Campbell to-morrow, Monday. She is returning from Kandy in the morning, and I can't possibly join in Gay's wildgoose chase. You are not to go, Helen, until I can come with you."

The authority with which he spoke brought back the colour to her face, and the memory of Fred's recent declaration of his love. She was strangely perturbed between the sudden revival of her old devotion to her husband and the new grateful affection that was growing in her heart for Fred.

"Must you go to the Campbells' house again?" she asked. "It tires you out. You ought not to do so much. I don't think I shall let you go. Miss Campbell can get on for a day or two quite well without you."

Gay misunderstood her attitude altogether, and she was rubbed up the wrong way. Helen seemed to be appropriating Fred as an accepted lover; which seemed to indicate that all Gay had urged against the engagement was held to be of no account. Yet it was not so. At that moment Fred was more to Helen as a much-needed friend than as a lover.

"This identity must be established one way or the other before either of you can think of marriage," said Gay, firmly. "The matter requires careful handling. We shall defeat our own ends if we scare the man away by threatening him with the police. I shall go up to the elephant rocks to-morrow afternoon on the chance of seeing him and telling him you are here, Helen."

"And if it should be Noel, bring him back to me, Gay!" cried Helen, in a troubled voice.

"I will if I can; I can't promise," replied Gay.

"I don't believe in Loveden's existence. This is some impostor," cried Fred, showing signs of deep annoyance. "For a reason I don't profess to understand you don't want Helen as a sister-in-law, and you are raising difficulties. Come, dearest!" said Fred, rising from his chair. "Let us go to my sitting-room and talk the matter over."

He took her hand, drew her up, and kissed her; while

Gay looked on helpless and aghast at the thought of her brother making love in this barefaced manner to a woman whom she believed to have a living husband. He might at least wait and see, she thought, until the truth of her tale was proved or disproved.

"Fred!" cried Gay, in real distress. "Don't be in too great a hurry!"

"We are not proposing to be married to-morrow," replied Fred, shortly, "if that is what you mean."

"Supposing this man is Mr. Loveden!" pleaded Gay.

"Prove it, and I shall be with you. At present I am not convinced. On the contrary, I firmly believe that you have been grossly imposed upon. You ought not to have mentioned the matter before Helen until you were more sure of your ground. You have only distressed her and given her pain. I am sorry to have to speak in this way, but I must say that you have been indiscreet; and you have been unkind to me."

Gay was bewildered and astounded at this sudden attack. It was as unjust as it was unexpected.

"You yourself proposed that Helen should be present and hear what I had to say," she protested warmly.

Fred made no reply. He was busy consoling Helen with all the authority of a lover, although Helen accepted it as the act of a dear friend. The couple passed out of the room, leaving Gay to recover herself and readjust matters in her mind as best she could.

The tables were turned upon her in the most startling fashion. In the simplicity of her heart she had never doubted their acceptance of her statement. She had pictured their concern at having placed themselves unwittingly in a false position. She had seen them in her mind's eye sadly drawing apart, Helen anxious, Fred apprehensive that he was to lose her; and she was prepared to pity them profoundly.

It was a terrible blow to find that not only was she discredited, but in addition she was accused by her brother of indiscretion and want of kindness in having related her story before Helen.

Gay was not given to tears. She was naturally of a cheerful,

hopeful disposition, ready to be friends with every one who would hold out the hand of friendship. Even to John Smith, whom she did not like, she was genial and hospitable.

There was a point, however, where her good-nature stopped. It was the case now, as she watched the couple leave the room, Helen's drooping figure leaning towards Fred and his arm round her waist. She felt downright angry and impatient with them both. It was not decent! Fred might at least wait to find out if her statement was true before he adopted the attitude of a lover.

She need not have been critical. No harm was meant. His action was due to pity as well as love. Fred's character was neither vigorous nor decisive. He leaned rather towards gentleness than strength. After all, Gay admitted to herself that she could not mentally see Fred acting in any other way under the circumstances than he was acting now. He always had a trick of putting aside as incredible any unproved fact that happened to be unpalatable.

Helen was different. Her character was a curious mixture of strength and weakness. She could be firm and determined if she chose. She was showing a certain amount of force at the present time, and was giving Fred a lead without letting him see that he was being influenced. She accepted the doubt Gay had thrown on her position as a widow, but it was not necessary to drive Fred from her side and refuse his gentle consolation. She was one of those women who could not live without pity and tender consideration from the stronger sex. Gay, whose experience of life was narrowed down to the simplicity of her existence on the tea plantation, could not help feeling that Helen was not as loyal to her first husband's memory as she ought to be. Her natural instinct should make her respond to the strange call of the dead. Her husband was her first love and the father of her children. If he were still alive, his wife's love ought to surge back to him in force, and the second lover be put aside without a moment's hesitation.

Gay had no sympathy for second marriages for women. She could not see herself on Geoffry's death going willingly to the arms of another man. But it was not the making of a second marriage on the part of Helen that troubled her so much as the entanglement of Fred's affections. A few

days of love-making to a man of his temperament would win him over heart and soul; and the longer the rupture was delayed the more he would feel it when it came. He would also be distressed at having contemplated a bigamous marriage.

With Gay action usually followed on the heels of thought. An hour's consideration of the matter resulted in a determination to set about the elucidation of the mystery herself. She would haunt the forest every day of her life until she had proved the stranger's identity. She would begin to-morrow, Monday. Fred would be away all day with Nellie; she could not help smiling at the memory of Helen's objection to his going over there: Helen was not blind to Nellie's leaning towards him.

Oh! why had he not been faithful to his boyhood's fancy? Why had he not asked honest Nellie to be his wife?

The clock struck ten. She rose and put out the lamp. The house was quiet; the children asleep; and for all she knew, Helen and Fred had gone to their respective rooms.

Before fastening the front door she opened it and went out on to the verandah.

The sky was clear and the starlight brilliant. There was no moon. The air was full of the sweet scents of freshly watered vegetation. She could hear the distant murmur of the mountain rivulets and the cries of the night birds in the jungle. A pack of jackals foraged and sneaked round the cooly lines, occasionally yelping their joy at the discovery of garbage.

Behind the mountains the lightning played over the heads of the distant clouds.

Gay looked towards the ridge with its vast forest covering the slopes to right and left as far as eye could reach.

Where was poor Noel Loveden? Was he lying in that damp jungle inhaling the fatal miasma sent up by the freshly watered vegetation?

He had no business to be there. His proper place was with his wife and children. He ought even now to be in her comfortable room with her strong sheltering arms about him.

Poor distraught nerve-racked Noel!

She listened for the sound of a movement in the garden,

half hoping that he might be waiting outside plucking up his courage to accept her invitation to come into the dry shelter of the bungalow. She leaned over the balustrade and called gently : " Mr. Loveden ! Mr. Loveden ! " but no answer came.

A cool wind blew gustily in her face. She shivered and went indoors. She closed the door quietly and passed on to her room, feeling her way in the dark. There she turned up her lamp, and wrapping herself in a shawl, found comfort in the re-reading of her letters. Geoffry, she was sure, would receive her story in a very different spirit. How she wished he would return !

CHAPTER XXIV

THE mental atmosphere of the bungalow was decidedly charged with emotion. Gay was thoroughly uncomfortable; Fred resentful, and Helen anxious and perplexed. Catherine seemed of the four the only one with any repose about her.

At eight o'clock in the morning of Monday Fred departed for Nellie's house. Her pony, ordered previously, was brought for his use. Helen, with her sun-hat on, was ready to walk part of the way with him. They started off together, the pony being led behind them. Catherine happened to be in the garden as they left. She looked at Gay and smiled.

Blissful in her own love affair, which was running smoothly, she felt the wish common to most lovers that every one else in the world should be the same. Knowing nothing of the storm-cloud that had loomed so suddenly on Fred's horizon, she was full of sympathy and congratulation.

"Don't take it to heart, Gay! They are well suited to each other," said Catherine, as the two disappeared down the garden path. "Perhaps you would have liked Nellie better. At one time I was sure that Nellie was the favourite with your brother, but I was mistaken."

"Yes; for years Fred was devoted in that direction; but Helen's introduction to Toona Kelli has altered matters. I always thought that Nellie's father was the obstruction. However, all I desire is Fred's happiness. If he can be happy with Helen I shall be content."

The use of the word "if" roused a doubt in Catherine's mind as to Gay's attitude. The sister was disappointed in her brother's choice, however much she tried to hide it.

"You don't mind her being a widow, do you? The children are darlings."

"No," said Gay, slowly. "I don't mind in the least having a widow as a sister-in-law."

For the life of her she could not help putting a slight accent on the word "widow." She was unaware that it had escaped her.

"A widow," said Catherine, with the authority of an engaged girl, "often makes a better wife for a man constituted like Mr. Goldenham, with his lameness and quiet disposition, than a rackety girl who wants to be always on the jaunt."

Catherine was determined to cheer up Gay and reconcile her to the loss of her brother. But Gay was disinclined for further conversation on a subject in which there must be reservations.

"I must do my housekeeping," she said, hastening off to the back verandah where Pedro was waiting for orders.

Fred did not return to the midday meal. It passed quietly, the only incident being the arrival of the postbag with the letters. Gay opened it with her duplicate key and distributed the contents—three or four business communications for Fred, a fat envelope for Catherine from Caversham, a letter in a feminine hand for Helen, and—nothing for herself! It meant that Geoffry would soon be home—perhaps he was even now on his way up from Kandy.

How glad she would be to see him! There was so much to say. What would he think of her story? He would not pour contempt and ridicule on it as Fred had done. On the contrary, he would help her with that wise old head of his and give her advice. He would know how to establish the identity of the fugitive, and he would relieve her of all responsibility.

Dear beloved old Geoff! Her pulses beat and the colour rose in her cheek at the thought of their meeting; of his kisses, and her own!

Immediately after lunch she changed into her riding-kit and prepared for a long afternoon in the jungle. The sun shone with the fierceness it assumes when rain is about. It seemed to her as she entered the forest that the earth had awakened to new life and was endowed with an unusual

sense of enjoyment. Flower and fern, shrub and tree, moss and orchid and creeper had drunk their fill of moisture ; and under the sun's hot rays were opening frond and bud, leaf and blossom to welcome the butterfly and the bee.

The scent of the watered earth rose in her nostrils and spoke of luxuriant tropical growth, and she rejoiced in it as the dweller in England rejoices in the April sunshine and showers that bring the bluebells and wood anemones to the spinneys and coverts.

Gay allowed the pony to set its own pace and pick its way over the places made slippery by the rain. She reached the elephant rocks and gave the call of the barbet. The rain had not penetrated under the big boulders, and she found a dry patch of ground free from grass and ferns. The bottle of sulphate of quinine that the stranger had asked for was in her bag, as well as the provisions she had put together for him.

She repeated her call ; but there was no response. For an hour she waited in vain. She would have pushed on to the old camping-place of the Gipsies had the jungle been dry, but it was too wet to ride through with any comfort.

What a terrible time Noel Loveden must be having if he were still camping in the jungle ! The thought suddenly occurred to her that he might have gone further to the east where the strength of the south-west storms was broken and the rainfall less.

She had dismounted to give the pony a rest. Now she got into the saddle again and turned its head homewards. At the waterhole she pulled up for a few minutes to give her call. There was no answer. The sun was still high up in the west, but below were the white-headed clouds that meant a repetition of the showers. They would probably be later to-day and later still the next. After two or three days the weather would clear, and the wind, what there was of it, would shift back into the north-east.

Ten days later would come a busy time for the tea-planters with the bushes flushing and the pluckers fully occupied. Geoffry would not have much time to spare ; nor would Fred.

She wondered where Geoffry was at that very minute, and whether he had arrived at Wanna Wella. He would

have to look round his estate to assure himself that all was well before he came to see her. She ought not to expect him before to-morrow at the earliest. He would come to tea as usual and stay to dinner. She was glad that she had promised to meet Mr. Loveden to-day instead of to-morrow.

Her thoughts went to the housekeeping, and whether the butcher could let her have a good joint, or whether she should order a couple of fowls to be killed. The pony shied violently and scattered all housewifely considerations to the winds.

Seated on a boulder by the side of the path was the stranger. He leaned forward with his head upon his hand. His attitude was one of dejection and misery. On his wrists and neck were the marks of the leech. The blood still oozed from two or three bites.

He looked at her and held up his hand as though to stop her. Then slowly rising, he came close to the pony and rested his long thin arm on the pony's neck.

"Mr. Loveden, I am so glad to see you again! I have brought the quinine and some more food. I want to tell you something." She laid her hand on his shoulder to detain him if possible until she had had her say. "You have a wife?"

He shot an uneasy and startled glance at her.

"Yes, yes!" he whispered hoarsely. "Helen!—Lennie as I called her! She was Helen Warren, and we were married at the Fort Church in Colombo. What of Helen? Has she gone home to England?"

"No; she is still in the island. At this moment she is at my bungalow, not more than a mile away from this very spot."

"And the children—Betty, the baby, and Billy, a dear little chap of four—where are they?"

"They are with me too. Billy is a big boy of nearly seven now. It was Billy you found here in the jungle and carried to the elephant rocks. It was rather cruel of you to leave the poor little chap alone as you did. You should have brought him back to your wife."

"I couldn't! I couldn't And I didn't recognize the child; he has grown. Look at me! Am I fit to present

myself to my family? I was frightened that day. I intended to take the boy back to the place where I found him, but I saw my enemy; he was talking to the girl Maridi."

"It is unfair of you to keep away from Helen and the children. Do you know that she believes you to be dead? She is wearing widow's weeds for you!"

"Is she? Poor darling! Is she the lady I see walking in your garden sometimes in black? I see her from an opening in the jungle up there."

He pointed to the ridge above them.

"Yes, that is Helen Loveden and no other. I have told her that you are here. She begs and prays that you will come to her. Won't you come, Mr. Loveden? Do!"

He pressed closer to the pony and laid the other hand on the end of the saddle.

"You are so good to me!" he cried; and, to her consternation, the tears gathered and fell.

He was too weak and unstrung to control himself. His head dropped upon her knee as she sat in the saddle, and he gave way to the emotion she had roused by the mention of his wife and children.

Gay, with her protective instincts thus strongly appealed to, slipped her arm still further round his shoulders and clasped him firmly. She wanted him to feel that some one cared for him, and was willing to shelter him if only he would have confidence in that shelter.

"Don't fret over it, Mr. Loveden! Helen loves you still. What does it matter how you look? Her heart will ache for you the more if she sees you in this plight. She will nurse you back to health and strength. Cheer up and come with me."

Gasping hysterical sobs shook him, and he could not speak. She bent low over the poor bowed head and continued to pour out words of encouragement and comfort. That they penetrated his shocked brain she felt sure. Unconsciously his arms had drawn closer round her. They no longer rested on the saddle, but clung about her waist as the arms of a frightened, miserable child might cling in a paroxysm of grief and despair.

Gradually the emotion wore itself out. The hysterical sobs became sighs, and with a catching of the breath he

mastered himself. The expression on his face as he lifted his head was saner than she had seen it before. The wild, hunted look was gone. It seemed as though his fit of weeping had cleared his brain.

"I will come! I will accept your invitation. I shall be safer in the bungalow with a good servant to look after me—and my wife." He paused and dwelt upon the word "wife" as though it brought much back to his mind that he had well-nigh forgotten.

"That's right!" cried Gay, joyfully. "You will forget all your troubles with Billy and Betty in your arms. They are such dear little people. You will be a proud father when you see them. Shall we start at once? It is only a mile from here."

She could not put the pony in motion till she had disentangled herself from his grasp. She withdrew her own arm and lifted his that rested across the pony's neck.

The pony still stood in the position it had taken when it shied at the figure of the wanderer. It stood across the path. Loveden was on the side with his back to the bungalow and his face towards the jungle. His eye constantly searched the distant track, ever on the watch for his mysterious enemy.

"I can't come now," he said nervously.

"Why not?" asked Gay.

"I must tell the old Gipsy that I am going to the bungalow. He will be looking for me. He too is always watching."

"When will you come? This evening after it is dark?"

"To-morrow—to-morrow will be best. Give me the quinine and the food. Quick! I must be off! I never dare stay long on the path that is used by men. I must get back to the track of the sambur."

Gay pulled out the different parcels she had brought, and he put them away in his pockets.

"Where were you last night when the rain came on?" she asked, as she handed him her gifts.

"With Dakshi in the big cave."

"Very bad for you to be out in the open, even though you might be quite dry. I shall tell Helen that you are

coming. My brother will give you a warm welcome. So shall I; and think of your wife and her delight——”

She stopped as he suddenly drew himself up like a startled stag. His eye was fixed upon the path up the hill. In the distance a man strode down towards them.

Loveden tore himself away. In vain Gay tried to hold him by the arm. He was too strong for her.

“It is only Mr. Smith, of Tota estate, one of our planters. There is nothing to fear from him. He would do all he could to help you, I am sure.”

“He! He is my worst enemy! It is he who will take vengeance on me if he can!”

With a rush he freed himself, plunged into the jungle, and was gone. Gay waited till Smith came up with her.

“How are you?” she said as she greeted him. “Hope you were not caught in that storm yesterday?”

“I just managed to reach the village before it broke. You probably had it earlier than we had on the other side of the cliff. You were talking to some one just now. Was it Goldenham?”

“No,” replied Gay, and her tone was not encouraging.

“May I put my hand on your saddle? I am very tired. It is a long tramp to Asseri’s village.”

“By all means. You should have taken a horse.”

“I wasn’t sure of returning this way.”

Gay asked no more questions about his errand. She thought it best to get away from their personal doings. She desired no confidences, and was not prepared to make any to John Smith. He seemed anxious as well as exhausted, and he was unusually silent. The firm grip he took of the saddle showed that he was glad of the support.

Twenty minutes later they emerged from the jungle. They caught sight of two people standing near the stables. One was Mrs. Loveden; the other Gay recognized with a leap of the heart as Geoffry.

She touched the pony with her whip to quicken its pace. As it started forward, Smith took his hand from the saddle. He seemed to hesitate, and his brow contracted with annoyance as his eyes fell on Charnes. Then, pulling himself together, he quickened his pace also, and in another minute they were at the stables.

Gay threw herself off the pony, and with shining eyes held out her hand to Geoffry, while Smith greeted Helen.

"I'm so glad, so thankful to see you back safely," she said in a low voice.

"Thank you," he replied politely, dropping the hand he had taken. "How are you, Smith?" he continued, turning to the purchaser of snakes and wild beasts.

"Dog tired with my long tramp. Miss Goldenham is an angel of mercy. She is going to give me some tea."

"Yes; come along indoors and sit down, and I'll order tea at once. You shall have the pony, Mr. Smith, to take you home. It has not done much for me. I only went as far as the elephant rocks. I am sorry that I did not offer it to you yesterday when you passed up the hill."

Smith gave her a grateful glance which did not escape Geoffry. They had met twenty-four hours previously, Geoffry noted, as the party went into the drawing-room, where tea was already spread. The conversation was general, and when Gay thought to have a few words with Geoffry, his attention was taken by Helen or by Smith or Catherine. It seemed rather hopeless to secure any private talk at present. She must wait till Smith had gone, and Helen and Catherine had been drawn away by the children. There would be plenty of time this evening: for of course he would stay to dinner. She tried more than once to catch his eye, but did not succeed. Yet once or twice, when she was speaking to John Smith, she was conscious that he was watching her.

Then she remembered the curious arrangement she herself had made with him. They were not engaged. The absence of any engagement placed a barrier between them in public. Gay knew Geoff's chivalrous nature. He would be the last man to compromise any woman, and he was behaving as though nothing had occurred between them to upset the old relationship. She knew now that she had acted in a foolish, childish manner. He ought to have insisted on having their engagement made known. Then he could have taken his proper position, and there need not have been this reserve and restraint.

Gay blamed herself and exonerated Geoffry; but now

and then she thought he might be a little less guarded, a little less indifferent and cold.

"Mr. Charnes, do tell us about the riots," said Helen. "Mr. Smith says he knows nothing. He was down in Colombo for a few hours, where things seemed fairly quiet."

Charnes looked at Smith in surprise.

"There was a bad riot round the Maradana station," he replied gravely. "A great many people were killed and injured, and many arrests were made. We lost three or four Europeans and a lot of the constables were injured. From all accounts it was quite as bad as the trouble we had at Kandy."

"Maybe you are right," replied Smith, indifferently. "I only know that when I passed through the crowd to go to the junction station, the people were all quiet enough."

"You were lucky," said Geoffry, shortly. He disliked Smith, and he thought he had good reason for still further dislike.

Helen asked a few questions about Campbell's death; but neither of the men could tell her anything more than she had already heard.

"I suppose Goldenham is with Nellie this afternoon?" remarked Geoffry. "There will be a lot to do. He has been left one of the executors of Campbell's will. I am the other. It is a comfort to think that Nellie will be very well off indeed. She is the only child."

Helen moved restlessly. In spite of the new aspect of affairs brought about by the possibility of her husband being still alive, she could not conquer her jealousy of Miss Campbell.

"Her father was killed by Asseri, the headman of the village over the ridge, wasn't he?" she asked.

"Poor Mr. Campbell! The first blow he received must have been fatal. There was so much malignity behind it," replied Geoffry.

"Was it a rice-pounder?" asked Helen.

"No; a club, cruelly spiked. One of the spikes entered his brain."

Smith rose and held out his hand to Gay.

"Good-bye, Miss Goldenham. You have been very good

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to me," he said, his eyes dwelling upon her with a curious expression. It was as though irresistible love and forced indifference strove for the mastery.

"Take the pony. You will find it ready at the stable. I told Pedro it would be wanted."

Helen and Geoffry had also risen, having finished tea. Helen was still plying him with questions.

"Where do you think the people got their arms? The riots would have been nothing, so the papers say, if it had not been for their arms. They were too well provided."

"That is what we all want to know. Just as I was leaving Kandy I heard incidentally that the police were in possession of a clue, an important clue. Some Tamil native, a syce, through personal spite, has made a revelation which they hope will enable the police——"

"Sorry to interrupt, but really I must be going," said Smith, hurriedly.

"I'm coming your way, and will walk with you," said Charnes, holding out his hand to Helen in farewell.

"But I'm riding—thanks to Miss Goldenham's kindness—and I must push on at a good pace."

"Aren't you staying to see Fred?" asked Gay, detaining Charnes, while Smith made his way to the stable. "You must stop to dinner, Geoffry," she added authoritatively.

"So sorry I can't. You must make my salaams to Fred and tell him I will look in another day. I'm tired and must go to bed early. I came up by the night train and had very little sleep as the carriages were full of returning specials."

"I particularly wanted to see you." She glanced at Helen who was walking down the garden path, her eyes searching the valley for sign of Fred on his way back. "I want your advice."

"I am afraid it is not of much use to you."

Gay took him by the arm, very much against his will, as he stood in the verandah and looked into his face.

"It will be of the greatest use. I could not write on the subject." Then, as he turned away from her, she continued: "What's the matter, Geoff? I am beginning to think that I shall need some explanation," she said.

"Perhaps we both need it. Anyway I'm too tired

and out of heart to talk sensibly about things that concern ourselves ; so, my dear little girl, you must wait."

It was coldly said, though there was no trace of unkindness in his tone. She was completely puzzled.

"Until when?" she asked.

"Shall we say to-morrow at this time?"

"That will suit me," replied Gay.

"Or a little earlier if you like."

"Half-past three will be best," she answered, thinking of her trip into the forest in search of Loveden.

"Very well," he replied shortly : and he walked briskly away as though he did not intend that she should follow.

Gay stared after him in amazement. This was not the happy confident lover who had left her to go to Kandy. This was not the man who had written so warmly, pouring out his love like tropical sunshine upon her.

Being of a practical turn of mind, she felt inclined to follow him and insist on an explanation at once ; but there was Smith ; he would be joining them on his way home before she could say half what she had in her mind. Then she remembered that Geoffry had said he was tired. It would be cruel to keep him away from his long-armed chair. To-morrow he would be different. A good night's rest would restore his spirits and bring back the old Geoffry.

Although she thus made excuses for him, she was deeply disappointed. To-morrow she hoped to bring Loveden back to his wife. The return would be tragic and charged with excitement. There would be Helen's consternation and distress at the condition of her unfortunate husband, on the one hand ; while, on the other, there would be Fred's trouble. It would come as a shock to him in spite of the preparation she had attempted to give.

Gay, in her warm sympathy for other people's troubles, would have no time for her own affairs. She would have to devote herself to Fred. Whatever her duty might be in the future to a husband, her first duty at the present time was to give all her attention to her brother.

Pedro came into the drawing-room to remove the tea. He stood respectfully waiting until she gave him leave to speak.

"Yes, Pedro. What is it?"

"That gentleman, Ee-Smith dorai, he running quickly to the stable and taking pony, quick!"

"In a hurry to get home, I suppose."

"Not going home, lady. He gone back into the jungle. Syce following plenty quick to bring pony home."

Gay stared at him in surprise. "You must be mistaken, Pedro. Mr. Smith was going home. I met him in the jungle coming down the hill, and he walked here with me."

Pedro came a step or two nearer. His face wore an expression of serious concern.

"People talking—can't say why—but bazaar people saying that police asking for Ee-Smith dorai."

CHAPTER XXV

ON Saturday the Gipsies moved to the place which they had chosen for the celebration of the wedding. It was a secluded spot in the heart of the jungle, and removed from every beaten track. In point of distance it was not far from the elephant rocks, but it was lower down and more sheltered.

The opening in the hillside was of the nature of a cave. It was virtually a cleft in the continuation of the cliff that overhung Asseri's village. The cliff ran for some miles along the ridge varying in height and broken in places by deep ravines and gullies. Down each of these gaps in the wall of rock a mountain stream found its way unseen over a rocky bed, deeply hidden in thick jungle. Its presence was only apparent through the purring of the water as it tumbled in little cascades and rapids towards the river at the bottom of the valley.

The roof of the cave was formed by the living rock, which projected like the eaves of some titanic house. It protected the interior of the cave from rain. The light of the morning sun penetrated the innermost recesses for a short time, keeping the air warm and dry. As the day passed the cave became dark ; and innumerable bats that used it as a roosting-place fluttered to and fro with high-pitched squeaks, waiting impatiently until the light was sufficiently subdued in the forest for them to venture forth.

Above the cave the cliff rose precipitously, affording little hold for vegetation. Here and there a shelf supported ridges of long ragged grass. Higher up creepers obtained a hold in the crevices and flung down their swaying trails over the face of the rock to serve as ladders and swings for the chattering monkeys. The hostile bee, ever ready to act on the

offensive, buzzed over the face of the precipice in search of crannies and secret chambers where it could hang its comb out of reach of the hand of man.

A tree with twisted trunk and wind-beaten limbs had established its roots in a rift not far from the eaves of the cave. It stood out on the steep slope of the massive roof tenaciously holding its own against the storms that swept through the valleys when the monsoon winds howled in the jungle. Its long rope-like roots cropped out from the grass that patched the eaves and hung bare and weather-beaten against the perpendicular walls. To the tree was fastened a rope made of the stems of lianes by which the Gipsies climbed to rob the bees' nests that were within reach.

The floor of the cave was lower than the ground outside, and the inhabitants had to step down a couple of feet into it. At the back were small cavities in the rough walls. In these the Gipsies stacked their cooking-pots, their baskets of snakes, and the bundles of dried palm leaves with which they roofed their huts when they made their camp in the forest glades.

Below the cave the mountain fell away in magnificent slopes. Wherever vegetation could obtain a foothold, trees and undergrowth flourished luxuriantly. The forest was untouched by the woodman's axe, and uncultivated by the hand of man. The giant keena trees lifted their heads into the intense blue of the tropical sky and covered themselves thickly with a canopy of glossy leaves tough enough to withstand a downpour that would have thrashed in its violence the tender horse-chestnut and elm foliage of England into fragments.

The creepers and the graceful lengths of the trailing bamboo linked the tall straight stems with green ropes; and the orchids poised themselves on the lofty branches, drooping their delicate white and purple, yellow and brown blossom over the edge of the boughs.

The undergrowth, dwarfed into insignificance by the giants that sheltered it, shed sweetness on the air with its wax-petalled magnolia-like blossoms. Here it raised a bouquet of flowers to the sun; there it hung a drapery of tender azure, heliotrope and pale pink.

Below the undergrowth was the world of ferns breast high

and covering a rich virgin soil that the planter might well covet for his cardamoms and tea.

The cave was accessible by a winding game track, discernible to the practised eye of the forest dweller, but vague and difficult for the stranger to find without a guide. It was well known to the forest tribe that had appropriated it to their own use. They had used more than one trail to reach the place lest a path, too well beaten, should be left to mark their retirement.

Now as they took possession of the vast opening in the mountain-side, and busied themselves in settling into their new domicile, they looked like rats in some noble cathedral, so small were they in comparison with their surroundings. No need to pitch their lean-to huts of cadjan leaves. There was space enough to spare for ten similar tribes.

The donkeys were tethered in a sunny glade higher up. The men carried earthen pots, which were carefully placed against the wall; they contained the precious toddy with which the marriage of Maridi was to be celebrated. The women bore bundles of firewood upon their heads; they set to work on arrival to build a fire just outside the cave on which to cook the midday meal. Children and dogs ran in and out, the former excited with the anticipation of what was coming; the latter with the prospect of fresh hunting ground where the jungle and tree rat abounded.

The tribe did not trouble itself much over wedding ceremonies. A bargain was made between the two families at which the whole assisted; and afterwards there would be the tying on of the badge. The most important event in the eyes of all was the consumption of the contents of the toddy jars, and the fair distribution of the liquor.

On Monday morning Maridi was prepared for her bridegroom. Her tangled mop of hair was reduced to something like order by the claw-like fingers of the older women, and the use of a primitive wooden comb. Flower petals of the sweet creamy sapu were thrust into the matted strands, and garlands were twined about her neck.

Her limbs, rendered smooth and soft with a liberal rubbing of oil, shone like dark polished oak. Her wedding outfit consisted of a new cloth of dark blue cotton bordered with yellow. It was only four yards in length, and without a

seam. It was wound about her supple body, and was fastened by no buttons nor hook, the ends being tucked into the folds about her waist.

She sat with eyes modestly cast down, trembling with excitement. Every eye was upon her, the women with interested amusement, the younger girls with open envy. The women offered suggestions as to the arrangement of the hair and cloth, grunted with approval, and made jokes that convulsed the assembly with noisy laughter; a sign that the toddy had already been tasted.

Laughter is rare among the primitive tribes of India and Ceylon; but when liquor is accessible it is easily provoked. The sound is mirthless and harsh. It is the wild, uncontrolled laughter of the satyr, such as might come from the wild boar if it was gifted with the power to laugh.

The bargaining was over, and the dowry fixed. Maridi brought her husband a donkey, five cooking-pots, and a bundle of new cadjans for the roofing of her hut.

The bridegroom was no other than the young snake-charmer who had nearly choked himself with stones when performing tricks in the garden at Toona Kelli. He possessed his snakes and baskets, and the stock in trade of the travelling conjuror. His gift to the bride was a string of brass beads on which was a marriage token. As soon as the necklace was fastened round her neck Maridi belonged to the man.

It was noon on Monday when the sound of excited voices heralded the approach of the men. All the morning they had been absent from the cave. Now they were coming with the bridegroom to see him take possession of the bride.

Dakshi, the old snake-charmer, stood at the entrance of the cave. Behind him were all the men of his tribe. Several had come up from the low country where they had been employed by the Sinhalese to catch snakes. Others returned from transport work among the cardamom plantations. A few—among them the bridegroom—had been on short visits to the bazaars and cooly lines on estates, showing their conjuring tricks.

The boys trooped behind, and with them was Dakshi's idiot son, who had sufficient sense to be able to take part in the festivities as far as the liquor was concerned.

Lastly came the dogs, watchful and unobtrusive. The

wise animals, seeing that no hunting was in prospect, withdrew to a warm spot where the sun penetrated through the jungle, and curled themselves up to sleep till their masters had ended a carousal in which dogs and donkeys found no place nor pleasure.

On the appearance of the men the women ranged themselves in a semicircle behind the bride. The jokes increased, and some of them elicited shouts from the men as well as the women.

The jars of toddy were brought forward and placed near Dakshi. A brass cup was handed to him, a treasure only used on similar occasions; and one of the pots was opened. He poured out some liquor and handed it to the bridegroom. The man approached his bride and waved the cup over her head as she sat. Then he poured a libation to the spirits of the forest, the demons of the rocks, stones, trees, and streams, and tossed the empty vessel back to Dakshi.

The necklace of brass beads was produced and thrown round Maridi's neck. With fingers that trembled so that he could barely hold the cord, the bridegroom knotted the necklace on the girl's neck. The women urged him to pull the knot tight with all his strength; and again remarks were made on the good luck of both bride and bridegroom. With the fastening of the string of beads Maridi became the man's property, to love, to beat, to enslave and to protect as he protected his beast of burden and his basket of snakes.

The talking and laughter increased until the chorus of the forest was well-nigh drowned. High up in the trees the pigeons cooed softly. The eagle and the falcon screamed above; and the smaller birds, securely hidden in the thick leafage of the undergrowth, chirruped and whistled merrily. The lizards and squirrels on the sunburned face of the rock called to their mates. The bees hummed about their honey-laden combs and the monkeys at a respectful distance chattered with curiosity.

Hathay, foremost among the women, touched the girl on the arm as the bridegroom stood looking down upon her with glowing eyes that saw nothing but his newly wedded mate.

Like a snake Maridi wriggled away out of reach. In an instant she was on her feet ready for the chase. She darted out of the cave and stood in the full light. She turned and looked at her husband with a beckoning gesture.

He bounded towards her. In a body the women flung themselves upon him, and a dozen hands were thrust out to detain him. Maridi's mother clasped his legs and the children clung about his feet. The men shouted encouragement to the struggling groom with wild laughter, while the bride screamed to him to come. Twisting, turning, struggling, fighting, he released himself, and, amid a chorus of yells from the whole company accompanied by wild barkings of the disturbed dogs, he followed his bride and disappeared into the forest.

Maridi knew her ground. She was young and strong and fleet of foot, and she meant to have her bit of fun before she yielded. On she bounded like a young doe, leading him by narrow trails through the jungle. Panting with the excitement of the chase, she took care never to get beyond his vision. Where the track was open she darted ahead; but where it was thick and leafy she allowed him to come within what seemed only a few strides of her. Then, looking back with a cry of pretended alarm, she dashed through the green fern that hung over the path and turned a sharp corner into a new trail.

Primed with toddy he ran clumsily and heavily. In vain he begged her to stop, now with entreaty and promises, now with an assumption of his new authority. Once he caught his foot in a strand of creeper and fell over. Maridi heard the soft thud of his fall. She stopped and, glancing back over her shoulder, called him a laggard, a donkey with no speed nor wits. He should have married an old woman, not a young one whom he could not catch. She laughed aloud in derision and again beckoned him on with a maddening gesture.

By fern and flowering shrub, beneath the giant trees where the grey lichen and green moss patched the great trunks, across mossy beds, down open glades and back again into the narrow trails she enticed him on, up hill and down dale. She leaped across the rocks in the mountain streams with cries of sheer joy and wild delight. With

arms thrown up above her head she thrust through leafy bowers, bringing down showers of mauve petals here and golden blossoms there. Sometimes she slackened her pace with a limp that hinted at an overtaxed ankle; he gained on her until his hand almost grasped her cloth. Then with a scream of pretended fright she started forward again, the limp gone and the cry turned to a joyous laugh.

Ah! the ecstatic bliss of the nymph of the woods! the frenzied excitement of the faun of the forest! The semi-savage bride lured her groom on to her own chosen retreat, as the leopard at dawn draws her mate by the same wild tracks—leaping, turning, crouching, springing, until the moment of surrender comes.

Tired at last of the chase, Maridi turned sharply up towards the foot of the cliff where the undergrowth seemed veiled with a gauzy wreath of pale pink blossom. She sprang through the delicate screen fearlessly with the sure knowledge of the hiding-place she herself had chosen, and she disappeared into a cleft in the rock. She threw herself down on a soft bed of moss and fern gathered by her own hand and in strict secrecy, ready for the homing nest of her wedding day.

With a great cry of joy the man followed her like a young satyr. He dashed blindly through the leafy screen with a bound that cleared her body and hurled him against the wall of the little cave. He fell helpless, panting, exhausted and happy on the soft carpet of moss beside her.

The bride's departure was the signal for the carousal to begin. The men seated themselves in order, Dakshi at their head. His youngest son and two of his grandsons were by his side. The brass bowl was again forthcoming, and into it Hathay poured the liquor. Other men followed his example, but their cups were of earthenware and cocoa-nut shell; and to them all Hathay went, each in the order of his position in the tribe.

Dakshi, according to custom, poured a little of the liquor on to the ground. Then, lifting the cup, he tilted it so that a thin cord of toddy fell into his open mouth. He held the cup above the boys' heads in turn, and they received their portions after the manner of young birds. As often as the cups were empty they were filled again by

Hathay. When the men had been served she attended to the women and children and drank herself. No one was forgotten, and the smallest child received its portion. There was no haste, no scrambling for the drink, no sounds of revelry. All were satisfied and content.

Dakshi set an example of unselfish liberality in dispensing his share, which was not followed by his fellows. He distributed a great deal more than he drank, a fact that escaped the notice of all except Hathay. She looked at him once or twice, but did not press him to take more.

The company was curiously quiet and self-absorbed. The toddy did not loosen tongues nor set free emotion of any kind. No one showed any inclination to sing a song or make a funny remark. The carousal was a much too serious affair in the eyes of the company to allow of any levity. The jokes lasted only while the bride was present. As long as it was possible to swallow, they absorbed the toddy; and when they could drink no more they quietly subsided. A hand was tucked under the cheek as each man sank down in turn and fell into a deep sleep, from which an earthquake could not have awakened him.

Dakshi alone remained unaffected. Two hours after his first draught he was still sober and wide awake in more senses than one.

The bride and bridegroom crept noiselessly in. The man sought among his personal properties and found a drinking-cup which he held out to Dakshi. By this time Hathay had joined the rest in slumber, and was no longer capable of doling out the portion that had been reserved for the couple. They seated themselves near the recumbent bodies, and it was not long before they, too, were asleep.

Dakshi watched for the end; he looked round with a grunt that was half a sigh; then he rose to his feet and stretched himself. His duty to his fellow-tribesmen was done. Now he was ready to devote himself to the other duty that he had taken upon his old shoulders.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE old snake-charmer glanced round at his sleeping tribesmen. His expression was not without a tinge of envy as he contemplated the effects of the liberal potations which Hathay had dispensed. He had purposely abstained that he might keep faith with the Englishman. He had made a pretence of drinking, but had poured the fiery liquid down the throats of the younger men. It was a great sacrifice on the old man's part, far greater than the man of the West could understand. Toddy could only be procured on rare occasions, and it was the one joy, the one indulgence of the forest man's wandering life. When it came it was taken with the solemnity of a rare feast, and was never drunk without the libation to the earth spirits.

A sigh of regret escaped his lips as he turned away and moved to the back of the cave. He opened one of the snake baskets. A cobra lifted its head, and at a touch from his hand it coiled itself about his arm and slipped round his neck. The warmth of the human body made it lie close and contentedly, as a cat clings to the warm lap that holds it. Dakshi replaced the lid of the basket and went out into the balmy afternoon air.

The sun had dried the face of the mountain and had moved westward, leaving the cave in shadow. The Gipsy stood on the higher ground outside and chirruped like a lizard. The call was answered. After a pause he chirruped again, and Loveden appeared on the game track leading to the cave. He stood leaning on a stout stick in an attitude of intense weariness.

"Well, old father! Is the wedding finished?" he asked.

"It is done, my son."

"And are your men and women all asleep?"

"They sleep like the dead; the children also. They will not wake till to-morrow."

"You are not asleep yourself, oh master of the tribe!"

"How can I let my senses leave me while your honour is under my charge? The rains will be upon us in the next moon. The forest will be sodden, and the ground rotten: the birds will hide and the tree frogs talk instead."

"True, old man! well I know it! In days long past, when I lived near the jungle, did I not see and hear the monsoon downpour?"

"Knowing it, would it not be well if your honour went to the good lady's bungalow where it will be dry and warm with the charcoal fires? The place where we camp after this is not good for the white man. Too much fever."

Loveden did not reply. He listened intently, turning his head from side to side.

"It would be better to go to the bungalow now," continued the snake-charmer.

"I was near the bungalow two hours ago and would have gone, but I saw my enemy. He joined the lady, and she took him back with her. I am very tired, old father!" He looked towards the recumbent forms in the cave.

"Would you sleep among all my drunken people?"

"As long as I can hide in some safe hole, what does it matter where I sleep?" asked Loveden, wearily.

"Lie down here, my son, and rest. I will sit near you and watch. No one can pass me and live while this is here."

His hand sought the cobra with a gentle touch. With the other hand he pointed to a spot near the entrance of the cave which was sheltered by the overhanging rock and hidden from the path by a huge boulder.

Loveden needed no pressing. He was dog-tired. Since he had met Gay he had walked to the elephant rocks as fast as his trembling legs could carry him. After passing the rocks he lost his confused sense of panic and travelled at a more leisurely pace. For two hours he had been tramping along jungle paths familiar enough after his long residence in the forest. Since the Gipsies had used the tracks they were more easily distinguished.

Loveden threw himself on the warm dry spot indicated by Dakshi and, secure in the knowledge that he had a guardian whose watchful eyes might be trusted, he fell into a deep sleep.

The light upon the opposite side of the gorge lost its whiteness and took on golden tints. In another hour the sun would set. Dakshi's ears were still keen to all the sounds of the forest. Nothing escaped him. Listening now, he heard the harsh call of a jay. Its cry set the other birds "talking," as the old man would have expressed it. They sounded the warning note indicating the presence of a stranger.

He rose and, leaning over the Englishman, laid his hand on his shoulder. Loveden awoke with a start. He sprang up and took cover in the undergrowth like a startled cheetah, ready to defend himself. Dakshi placed himself between the hidden man and the path by which a visitor must approach the cave. They waited motionless.

Suddenly the cracking of a stick underfoot told them that some one was approaching. Dakshi stepped out into the pathway and found himself face to face with John Smith.

The old snake-charmer put his fingers to his forehead in respectful greeting, and shifted the cobra so that he could take the neck and head of the reptile in his hand.

"That's right!" said Smith, with approval. "Keep that vile snake quiet. Where is the Englishman who lives with you? Is he drunk with the rest of those fools?" He spoke contemptuously and with irritation.

The Gipsy began a protest against the intrusion, and declared that he knew nothing of the Englishman; but his words were belied by the appearance of Loveden, who emerged from the jungle and stood directly behind Dakshi.

"I am here, Johann Schmidt!" he said in German. "What do you want?"

The nervousness had disappeared. Keen, alert sanity shone in his single eye. The information Gay had given him of his wife and children and their nearness to him had done much to take his thoughts off himself and restore his mental equilibrium. The close proximity of his deadly enemy seemed to have stimulated his brain.

"I am commissioned by General Vogelein to receive payment in full on his behalf from a traitor to the fatherland. Curse you and all your race!" he suddenly blazed forth. "You English have ever been our worst enemies!"

"That is your way of looking at the matter; it is not ours," replied Loveden with some spirit. "But since you have declared your hostility, we fight. I owe you nothing. I have already paid too dearly for my liberty."

"It is not enough!" cried Smith, furiously.

"You will have nothing else," replied Loveden.

"Do you know that your precious information led us into a trap and cost us two hundred of our picked storming troops?"

"I am glad to hear it!" returned Loveden, with a harsh laugh that irritated his hearer even more than his hot words. "Two hundred devils gone to Hell! Ha! ha! ha!" Dakshi gave him an uneasy glance. "And you! you hypocritical dog! you ought to follow them with your pretended pity for animals! You humbug! you sheep's head!"

The snake-charmer knew nothing of German, but he understood the ring in their voices. It meant that Loveden was defying the other to do his worst. Dakshi was aware of John Smith's object in seeking Loveden. This quarrel meant mischief. He shifted uneasily from one foot to the other as though in preparation for some abrupt and hostile movement on the part of Smith. He knew by experience that Loveden's sanity never held out long. It would suddenly break. Confusion of mind would follow, bringing panic with hysterical weakness. The alert instinct of self-defence might weaken and he would be caught off his guard. Then the awful deed might be effected before he himself could intervene. Once done there could be no undoing, no restoration. The Englishman whom Dakshi had learned to love like a son would be left blinded for life.

The hand of the snake-charmer closed upon the snake with a signalling grip. The reptile reared itself, spread its hood and hissed softly.

Schmidt, to give him his true name, had been rendered so angry by Loveden's words that he was speechless for

the moment. The planter was taller and more muscular, emaciated though he was, than the British-born German. His contempt and outspoken anger in place of the nervous fear that he had hitherto shown was a surprise to Schmidt. After all, it might not be an easy task to give the Englishman the contemplated knock-out blow. However, there was no relaxation of intention, no shirking on the part of the German. The orders of the fatherland were sacred and must be carried out to the letter.

Schmidt made a sudden plunge forward, intending to pass the Gipsy when he thought he was off his guard, and reach Loveden as he stood there apparently cornered and with no way of escape. He forgot that he was dealing also with a keen-eyed forest man in Dakshi, quick in his movements as a jungle cat. Instead of laying his hands on the Englishman, he found himself beating against a brown body as hard and as unimpressionable as a well-seasoned saddle, while the snake hissed and rose to strike.

By a twist of the arm on the part of the Gipsy, Schmidt was projected violently against the rough surface of the boulder and brought to the ground. At the same moment the snake-charmer said something to Loveden, who was immediately behind. In response Loveden slipped past before Schmidt could recover his feet and disappeared down the track.

With a round English oath the German picked himself up. For a moment it seemed as though he meant to attack Loveden's protector; but seeing the hostile attitude of the snake with its hood spread and the quivering forked tongue, he thought better of it. He was not there to wreak his vengeance on a Gipsy, but to bring to book a man who had played the fatherland false. He turned away and plunged down the track Loveden had taken.

The old man looked after him and grunted as he calculated on the fugitive's chances with the start he had had. Then he turned and entered the cave. Not a soul was awake but himself. He glanced to right and left at the recumbent bodies. Maridi had joined the women; her husband was with the men. He replaced the cobra in its basket and secured the lid. His hand reached out for a long staff leaning against the wall of the cave. Without

any sign of haste or anxiety he regained the path and followed the two Europeans.

Now and then he stopped to listen. His eye searched the wayside as he strode along with bent knee and springing step, noting a displaced leaf, a broken twig, the indentation of a foot, the conduct of the birds. Nothing escaped his sharp glance. Here they had quickened their pace. There the pursuer had been close upon the pursued. The fugitive had bounded aside to escape the hand that was within a couple of inches of its grip.

With unerring instinct the old snake-charmer tracked the men and kept them within his ken. Sometimes he took a short cut, joining the path immediately behind them, but keeping out of sight himself.

Loveden was getting exhausted. It was time to interfere. The task the old man had set himself was not easy.

At a point where the trail led up a steep slope through a thick bit of jungle Loveden suddenly felt his arm seized ; and before he could cry out he was drawn through a tangle of creeper to find himself on another trail. It was the track of the wild boar which ran parallel to the wider path he had been pursuing. Dakshi pointed silently and Loveden fled.

Then the Gipsy listened. He could hear the heavy breathing of the German as he struggled up the hill. Some hundred feet higher the track turned sharply and went downhill, making an acute angle.

Dakshi entered the thick ferny growth and slipped like a jungle cat downwards in a bee line till he reached the trail along which Schmidt must come if he pursued his way.

The Gipsy was now ahead of him. With quick hands he snapped a small branch here and left it hanging ; broke down a long frond of fern and left it across the path as though it had been caught by a careless foot. He kicked the tender creeping plants aside and crushed them under the broad soles of bare feet. No one could fail to see the trail he left unless he were blind.

And now, like Maridi, the bride, the chase went at the pleasure of the pursued and not the pursuer. Dakshi, with a keen sense of enjoyment, entered into it with zest. Never allowing himself to be seen, he kept himself in evidence, luring Schmidt on to fresh exertion, turning and twisting,

always leaving ample signs of his presence, till they were far from the place from which they had started.

The sun fell lower behind the mountains. White-headed clouds again crept up from the low country and called out the wreaths of mist upon the ridges. The thunder rumbled in the distance with a long echoing roar. The storm might break at any moment and bring the rain.

Dakshi stopped as the last ray of light left the sky and cloud enveloped forest and hill, valley and ravine. In a minute or two Schmidt came heavily tramping along the trail towards him. He did not see the Gipsy until he was almost up against him.

"It's you!" he cried in astonishment. "You old devil! Where is the Englishman? Which way has he gone?"

Dakshi pointed with his thumb to the hill above. Through a gap in the trees the cliff of rock could be seen against the purple-grey sky. Whether it was the same that brooded over Asseri's village or the continuation of the wall of rock that held the cave he could not tell. It did not seem familiar; but he remembered the fact that familiar scenery looked at from some unfamiliar point had a trick of seeming strange and unrecognizable.

"Show me where the Englishman is hiding," he demanded.

In apparent obedience the Gipsy led the way. Schmidt did not dare to do otherwise than follow him. To lose sight of the old man would mean that he would be nothing less than lost, a danger to which the rash pursuer was fully alive.

"Is the Englishman far away?" he asked presently, as he plodded after his guide.

"Not far, your honour. He shelters from the rain among the rocks. Fire will soon tear the clouds apart, and rain will fall. It is necessary for us all to find some place where the water cannot reach us."

Darkness was coming on apace, and Schmidt was leg-weary as well as hungry with his long walk. A flash of light shone through the canopy of foliage overhead and the thunder spoke. Dakshi turned up towards the cliff, and in another five minutes of severe climbing through a narrow and uneven track he brought Schmidt to the foot of a precipice.

There was no cave. Three or four enormous boulders,

against which an ordinary house would have been like a single brick in comparison with a mansion, were piled on the mountain-side. Beneath the huge rocks were dry spots where the rain could not come. Giant keena trees grew near, and the earth beneath them, owing to the dryness, was free from vegetation, except for a few ferns and patches of moss. Dakshi pointed to a spot where the ground was smooth and soft with long ages of unwatered dust.

"Must stop here till the storm is gone," he said, with an entire absence of any emotion.

His words received corroboration in a dazzling flash of lightning that passed over their heads in a maze of crinkled threads of electricity. The thunder followed immediately, its echo tossed from the cliff above to the opposite hill and back again, like a plaything of the gods, till it died away in the distance in a dull roar.

A sudden blast of wind swept the tops of the trees like the hand of a giant passing roughly over the foliage. Then the heavens opened and the rain descended with the swish of a spraying waterfall. The storm had come later than on the previous evening, but there on the mountains it was none the less fierce and heavy. The frightened birds, already gone to roost, fluttered down among the leaves and branches to find a more sheltered place. Unwary insects were beaten mercilessly to the ground, and carried away on runnels of water. Only the great living rock cliff stood up unshaken and impervious to the riot of the storm.

Schmidt crept silently beneath the boulders and sat down exhausted with his long tramp. He was cowed by the fury of the weather. Darkness came on apace; not the tropical darkness of brilliant starlight, but the murky enveloping night of the enclosed jungle depths. It gave him an uncanny sensation of hostile solitude amounting to imprisonment.

In the gloom of the night he had lost sight of the Gipsy. He had no love for the old man, but at the moment he would have been glad to have had his company. He strained his eyes into the flurry of the storm-burst, and called him by name; his voice was lost in the roar of the rain and the continuous thunder.

An hour passed during which Schmidt was kept dry by the shelter of the rocks. The rain lessened and the thunder

ceased as suddenly as it began. The wind dropped, and the forest from being a chaotic world of swaying trees, pouring floods, roaring thunder and dazzling blue lightning, dropped into weird silence. A magic hush had fallen upon it as if at some mystic command; and the trees, schooled into obedience, stood like naughty children dripping and trembling at the displeasure they had incurred.

It was pitch dark, for though the rain had ceased, the sky was still overcast with thick cloud. There was a rustling in the top of one of the trees close at hand. A long strangulated gasping scream rent the night air. Schmidt cowered down again under the rock with a shudder. It was the great hawk owl, the devil-bird, whose cry bodes evil to all who hear it.

CHAPTER XXVII

It was Tuesday. The dawn was just breaking when Schmidt, after a restless, uneasy night, rose from his dusty lair. The voices of the night had disturbed him frequently. He had been startled more than once by the penetrating shriek of the devil bird, whose cry resembled closely the screams of a woman in the hands of her murderers.

The prolonged howls of the jackals, followed by a yapping chorus, broke his dreams; and once a beast of some kind, more venturesome than its fellows, sniffed round him, circling closer to ascertain if the figure lying there was alive or dead. Sometimes an old boar led his family along the game track, rooting into the soft moist ground for tubers and grubs. Towards dawn the tramp of light hoofs told him that the deer were on the move, making their way to the patanas and grassy glades.

Schmidt alone of all the forest folk went hungry. The night's rain brought him no food. He had not dined on the previous evening. The last meal he had taken was the early afternoon tea Miss Goldenham had provided at the Toona Kelli bungalow. Her scones and cakes were not as staying as the excellent five-course dinner his servants were in the habit of providing for their master. He was conscious, as he rose and knocked the dust out of his tweed suit, of an intense longing for his customary seven-o'clock tea and toast.

The sky was clear. All sign of the thunderstorm had disappeared, and the mist on the hills had dissolved into the clear blue ether of the tropics. This fact put courage and hope into his heart.

He looked round at his resting-place. It had been, and probably would be again, the haunt of jackals. He went

out into the open, choosing a spot where the jungle was thin, so that he might have a glimpse of the sky. Judging from the golden light, he concluded that he was looking towards the south-east; also that the rock behind him, from which the massive fragments had fallen, was probably a continuation of the cliff that overhung Asseri's village. Whether the village was to the right or to the left he could not decide. There was no view to be had of the low country, as from the cliff above the Sinhalese village. A valley covered with jungle seemed to enclose him, and it was a part of the hills in which he felt sure that he had never been before.

He found a small flat piece of rock that would serve as a seat, and sat down. His watch had stopped. In the excitement of the evening before he had forgotten to wind it up. From the rapidly increasing light, and the glorious colours that were flooding the sky, he took the time to be a little before six.

In a short time the old snake-charmer with his objectionable companion, the cobra, would come to show him the way back to some familiar point on the path by which he might reach Asseri's village. Perhaps in the expectation of a reward he would bring something in the shape of food. However coarse it might be, it would be very acceptable.

The sun appeared above the opposite ridge, and sent its rays down into the ravines and valleys. Schmidt was glad of its warmth. Hunger had made him cold and chilly, even though he was well clothed.

The activity of the electricity—that mysterious element of life without which nature's vitality could not be sustained—seemed to have awakened and quickened the forest into renewed vigour. The birds were busy in the trees and bushes over the feast of insects they found on bark and foliage. Newly emerged butterflies with sunwarmed wings sought the opening blossom. The whole jungle, washed and refreshed by the evening's rain, and now basking in the welcome light of day, sent up a sweet smell of rising sap and flowers and rich watered leaf mould.

The senses of the lost man were dead to these delights. He watched with increasing anxiety for the coming of the Gipsy. The man who had led him there must be aware that he could not extricate himself without assistance.

Dakshi must know that he was awaiting the coming of his guide with impatience.

A lurking fear haunted Schmidt lest the old man should have crept back to the cave and joined the drinking party. If such were the case, it might be hours before he recovered his sobriety sufficiently to remember where he had left the European.

Schmidt had plenty of time as he sat there to think over the events of the past weeks, and to consider how far he had succeeded in his different missions.

He was body and soul in bondage to the fatherland. It was a willing service, rendered with unquestioning obedience. Moral and religious law had no part in it. The fatherland commanded; he obeyed. The fatherland paid for his services and took the responsibility. He accepted the pay, whether it was an adequate remuneration or not.

The whole world has marvelled at the far-reaching effects of this call of the fatherland upon its sons. It has been found incomprehensible, involving as it does the yielding of the conscience into the keeping of an impersonal body, the suppression of individual morality, and the unquestioning sacrifice of life.

Regardless of any private feelings he may have had, the Teutonic fetish had demanded of Schmidt the perpetration of a cold-blooded repulsive deed, against which his humanity ought to have risen in remonstrance and horror.

He was to deprive a man of his sight; a man who had never wronged him personally, and of whose very existence he was ignorant until he was brought into contact with him under orders.

Loveden, he was informed, had played traitor, and had given Vogelein false information whereby two hundred soldiers lost their lives. This was sufficient, he was told, to justify the perpetration of an inhuman act on his part. It did not matter that the victim had already suffered; he was to be punished further. Already inquiries had come from the fatherland through secret agents as to whether the order had been fulfilled; and if not, what was the reason for the non-fulfilment.

So far Schmidt had failed. His failure was not due to

neglect nor to an absence of perseverance. Many a tramp he had had through the forest to find his prey. Hours had been spent in watching and waiting; but all his efforts had been unsuccessful. Through the old snake-charmer's vigilance his victim always eluded him.

Yet the man who had passed as John Smith was not by nature inhuman. He was no hypocrite, in spite of Loveden's accusation. He could not stand by and see an animal ill-treated without going to its assistance. The howl of a dog in pain went through him like a knife, and roused his fierce anger. His wrath against the syce whom he caught vindictively kicking Nellie Campbell's pony in the stomach was genuine. He had beaten his own dog-boy for stealing the dog's food and allowing it to go hungry; and with his own hand he had more than once cut the hobble rope of a Gipsy's donkey when it was tied too tightly.

Johann Schmidt, in spite of his German extraction, had a strong leaning towards a regular inoffensive life. He would have asked for nothing more at the hand of fate than domestic comfort, good food, trained servants, and horses, and a circle of genial friends; but the fatherland willed it otherwise.

A girl like Gay Goldenham constituted a powerful temptation to cut himself adrift from the bonds of his fetish and settle down to the joys that were less perilous than those that were to be found in an overstrained patriotism. He had resisted the temptation to his own disadvantage, and had deliberately stifled the aspirations that were conjured up by the sight of the English girl. All the same he had felt jealous of Charnes. In a dog-in-the-manger spirit he had dropped unwarrantable hints to Gay's brother that Charnes was not as straight as he might be, and had left the simple-minded Fred to infer that his old friend was not desirable as a brother-in-law.

The design on Loveden was not the only commission received from the fatherland and for which he was paid. He had had more success in supplying contraband arms to the Sinhalese and stirring up their disloyalty than in accomplishing Loveden's punishment. But even in this matter all was not plain sailing. There were many difficulties besetting his path; and when, as John Smith, he cursed

"the enemy," he did so from the bottom of his heart. He took care never to name the enemy. His acquaintances would have been startled could they have known that it was not to the German nation he alluded, but the British.

While drinking tea in Gay Goldenham's drawing-room, Charnes had let fall a piece of information that went through Schmidt like an electric shock. The police had a clue as to the secret source of arms with which the rebel Sinhalese were supplied.

If this were so, and they were on the right track, his field of useful service for the fatherland was closed for ever as far as Ceylon was concerned. To supply arms to rebels was an offence punishable with death.

As Schmidt sat there waiting for the Gipsy he had plenty of time to speculate on the probabilities of the circumstances. Who could have betrayed him to the police? The more he considered the question, the more confirmed he was in his belief that it was Asseri. Hoping to save himself from death, the headman must have turned King's evidence.

If this were the case, and the police were already searching for him, he must find some means of leaving the island secretly. This could only be done with the assistance of the Sinhalese. He must reach the coast and escape in a fishing-boat, hoping to be picked up by a native sailing ship bound for the Straits. It was a prospect that he did not relish.

He cursed his fate that his schemes had failed; and he cursed the English, who with all their stupidity always seemed to wriggle clear of their difficulties and come out top-dog in the struggle.

Now and then Schmidt roused himself out of his ruminations to listen for the coming of the Gipsy. The jungle was full of sound, but it came from the voices and activities of the forest folk. It was a curiously satisfied chorus, as if nature was well content with its conditions. The rain had brought plenty, and the querulous croak and chirp of the seeker after food had changed into a general hum of satiety. He had plenty of time for thought, more than he needed.

His seat was hard; he was beginning to feel faint for

want of food, and he blamed himself for not having had the forethought to put some biscuits in his pocket. He rose and stretched himself, and began to pace up and down between the rocks and the place where he had sat. He dared not go far lest he should lose sight of the spot where the Gipsy had left him. He ventured, however, to follow the game trail by which he had come, blazing it by breaking down branches and ferns and kicking away moss and stones. In this manner he managed to explore half a mile in different directions and retrace his steps easily. None of the tracks he pursued brought him to any place that he could recognize.

Now and then he called, sending out the melancholy cry used by the natives, a penetrating note that reached the opposite side of the valley. There was no reply.

The day grew warmer and thirst began to trouble him even more than hunger. His mouth was dry, and he longed intensely for the glass of iced whisky-and-soda that he allowed himself at lunch. If he ventured off the game track he might perhaps reach a stream; but the danger of doing so would lie in the difficulty of retracing his steps and getting back into the path with which he was familiar.

The sun climbed high and passed overhead towards the west; Schmidt knew that half the day was gone. By this time the Gipsies should be awaking from their sleep of intoxication and able to go about their usual occupations. If Dakshi had joined them even late last night, he too should be recovering and sufficiently in possession of his senses to remember the man he had left alone in the jungle.

The thirst increased. Water he must have; he could not exist without it. It was not far off. From a point on one of the paths he had explored, leading down the valley, he had heard the tinkle of a falling stream. His fancy pictured the cool foaming water till he could resist it no longer. He followed the track and caught the sound; then, as he listened, the longing increased till he could bear it no longer. It seemed only a short distance away, and if he took a beeline downwards he could easily find his way back.

Breaking his way recklessly through the undergrowth he plunged down the steep descent in the direction of the luring splash of what he judged to be a small waterfall. The going was rough. Under a deceptively smooth surface of green fern lay hidden boulders slippery with moisture and fine green moss. The slope of the mountain grew steeper the lower he went. Suddenly he felt his feet slip from beneath him, and he fell, rolling helplessly down through the long yielding stalks of the ferns till he found himself in the rocky bed of the stream.

Fortunately the place in the stream where he landed was not more than a foot deep. He picked himself up and leaped to a flat surface of rock in the middle of a little backwater to the side of the waterfall. He knelt down and scooped up the precious liquid in his hand, drinking thirstily.

Then he looked up and saw that he had fallen over the edge of a miniature precipice six or seven feet high. The rock was overhung with ferns, balsams, wild begonias, and ginger. It would be impossible to climb back on to his trail by the wall of rock. He would have to make a little detour and find a place where a slope would allow him to walk up from the edge of the stream. He was quite sure in his mind that he could strike the game track that he had left.

He looked towards the direction in which he thought the cliff and sheltering rocks should be, to take it as a landmark; but he was too much embowered by the trees and shrubs to see anything but a fretted patch of blue over his head.

Refreshed by the water, of which he took several long draughts, he found a spot where it was possible to leave the stream and begin his upward climb. It was not easy, and progress was very slow. He was waist-deep in vegetation at the best of times. Often the fronds of the ferns clung about his shoulders, and the trailing bamboo caught and entangled his feet. Often the shrubs and bushes obliged him to move on this side or that; but he did his best to keep on a straight line and go upwards.

How long he pressed through the rank growth he did not know; but suddenly he became aware that the ground

was smoother and the travelling much easier. He stopped, and his heart gave a bound as he realized that he was once more on a game track of some kind. Now he would not be long before he reached the foot of the cliff.

As he looked about him he tried to discover whether he should go to the right or to the left. He could see none of his own marks. He must have struck the path below the point where he left it. He turned to the left and plodded on for some distance till he found himself going downwards. This was not the way to the cliff. The rocky precipice must be above him. He turned round and retraced his steps, stopping now and then to examine the trees and shrubs.

As far as the appearance of the forest went he might not have moved ten yards away from the place where he joined the track. The marvellous beauty of the jungle was as devoid of distinguishing marks as the desert itself. One trunk was exactly like another, one flowering shrub was identical with another flowering shrub. It was as though some wizard held the traveller by his spells in the same spot while feet and legs toiled on ceaselessly.

A curious thing was happening to his brain. He was losing his sense of time and distance ; and, in addition, the object of his efforts was becoming confused. Why was he there ? What was he doing ? In which direction did he want to go ? Was he hiding from the police ? Or was he in pursuit of the man who had been condemned by Vogelein ?

He pulled himself together with an effort, and made a guess at the hour. It must be four o'clock. With something of a shock a suspicion crossed his mind that he had been travelling away from the cliff instead of towards it. Long before this he ought to have arrived at the boulders where he passed the night, and where the Gipsy was probably waiting for him. He also recalled the fact that he had lately not been going systematically up the hill, but sometimes he had followed a downward path. He could not remember that there were similar undulations in the track that took him to the stream.

The strange part of this wandering in the unknown jungle is that the traveller may change his direction without

knowing it ; he may be firmly convinced that he is working steadily due north when he is going west. Nowhere in the vast unexplored forests of Ceylon is the ground level. Within the valleys are lesser ridges that form miniature valleys and ravines ; and the ground bristles with unevennesses that are deceptive and misleading at every step. At the same time, unless the altitude is considerably altered, the scenery of the jungle does not change. The thick overshadowing growth encloses the wanderer ; and he seems to be for ever penetrating a leafy glade that has no exit. The great trees rise above the bowery undergrowth and spread a canopy overhead. The huge moss-grown trunks and orchid-laden boughs are linked together with luxuriant creepers that help still more to veil the way.

Schmidt was feeling light-headed and unbalanced as well as confused. Now and then he actually laughed as he contemplated the strange predicament in which he found himself. The laugh was followed by a dull despair.

What was he about ? Would somebody kindly tell him ? A snake crossed his path, wriggling swiftly out of sight. Snakes ! They belonged to the Gipsies. He wanted no more snakes just at present. He had done with them.

Again he laughed. That was a clever plan of his own invention of placing the contraband arms in big baskets and putting a cobra or a tic polonga on a layer of grass on the top ! It kept prying fingers and spying eyes from discovering the gifts that the kind, beneficent fatherland was sending the poor oppressed insurgents. No good stirring up a downtrodden people to rebel against their rulers without giving them a proper supply of arms !

Again the laugh broke from his blistered lips, harsh and uncontrollable. It startled him.

He stopped once more in his plodding walk and listened. Where was that cursed old Gipsy ? Why didn't he come ? Perhaps a shout might bring him. He would try. The forest rang with the call of the woodman.

A startled jay rustled the foliage of the tree above him. With a raucous cry it warned the jungle folk of the presence of a stranger. A grey monkey on the opposite side of the hill repeated the warning to his family in a

hoarse scream. A sambur stag rose from its lair, shook itself and sniffed the air, prepared to scud away if the scent boded danger from man or from the spotted beast.

Once more Schmidt called, his voice no longer strong and under control ; but sufficiently powerful to penetrate some distance. He listened.

This time, from the far side of the valley, came the faint sound of a response. A man shouted back with the familiar call of the Sinhali woodcutter.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SCHMIDT quickened his pace, and hurried feverishly along the track. Salvation was at hand. Food and drink were within reach ; and though life had been rendered precarious by his own nefarious dealings with the rebels it seemed comparatively safe.

He shouted as he walked to keep in touch with the man who had answered him. As he stumbled along he looked in vain for the rocky cliff and the spot where he had slept. He seemed to have wandered far away from it and to have reached a part of the hills where they were completely covered with jungle. However, it did not matter now that he was in communication with a human being who presumably knew the forest better than he did. He hoped that it was Dakshi himself ; his pleasure at seeing him would mitigate the anger that he felt at having been left so long without some sort of assistance.

The trail opened slightly, and the vegetation was less thick, letting in more light and air. The answering voice grew louder, which meant that his deliverer was coming nearer.

He could see the clouds now. They were turning from silvery white to a rich golden hue, which meant that the sun was not far from its setting.

Schmidt stood still and continued to shout with all his force. His strength was giving way, and his legs refused to carry him further. The answering voice seemed to his impatient mind slow in coming, and there were long intervals between the shouts that made his heart sink with fear lest his rescuer should not be able to find him.

Suddenly, to his intense relief, a call came from behind him. It was close at hand. He turned and looked down

the trail along which he had been toiling. He could not see far, even though the jungle was less overgrown.

Two figures came into sight, walking steadily in single file. One was a Tamil; the other a Gipsy.

He recognized neither. The Tamil was Nellie Campbell's syce whom he had misused; the other was Maridi's husband in whose mind still rankled certain memories of mysterious dealings when the Gipsy girl was treacherously selling the information that the fugitive was hiding in the Gipsy camp.

They salaamed respectfully and waited for him to give them his commands. "I have lost my way in the jungle, you must show me the path that will lead me out," he said.

"Where does master wish to go?" asked the syce.

"To Asseri's village below the cliff."

The syce was silent. He glanced at the Gipsy, who signed to him to explain, the syce being more accustomed to speak with the English masters.

"To Asseri's village? Yes, sir," said the syce, as his eyes came back to the haggard figure that faced him.

"Then, lead the way," continued Schmidt, with a touch of irritation.

"It is many miles from this place. Your honour has walked a long distance." Then he looked up at the sky. "It will soon be dark. No one can walk in the jungle after the night comes."

"I don't want to stay another night in the jungle. Lead me out of it; put me on the cart road that goes down into the low country, and I will reward you."

Still the men showed no signs of moving. Schmidt was feeling sick and ill with long fasting and was no longer master of himself. He broke out in hysterical anger, and abused them in their native tongue. He ordered them, under threat of a severe beating, to take him to the Sinhalese village.

"Your honour knows that the headman is in Colombo under police guard. He is to die to-day by the shooting of a gun," said the syce, watching Schmidt with cold curiosity.

"The fool! Why did he kill the old Englishman before the signal was given? He was not there to vent his personal spite on any single man. He was there with all his men to free his country from the rule of a hated foreigner. Take me to his village. His wife will give me food and shelter."

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"She has gone to Colombo to see her husband before he dies."

"Silly woman! They will shoot her too! Lead on, and I will give you both a good reward," cried Schmidt, impatiently.

"Does master know that the police are waiting at the village?"

"The police? What are they doing there?" asked Schmidt, turning anxious, bloodshot eyes upon the speaker. He had forgotten what Charnes had said. It all came back to him now, and left him confused and bewildered.

"They wait for your honour's coming," replied the syce, regarding the wretched man with the expression of the sportsman who has brought down his quarry after a long hunt.

"Why should they wait for me?" cried Schmidt, with an attempt at braving the situation out.

"They have found two of your honour's baskets in a Sinhali's house in Kandy. They killed the tic polongas and emptied the baskets. Since then they have been asking for your excellency."

The syce did not add, as he might have done with truth, that he had been the one to point out the baskets to the police, and to suggest that they should be searched, a suggestion that had been promptly acted upon and duly rewarded. The man had not offered his services on small pay to the Gipsies as a transport cooly without an object. His object was accomplished, his spite satisfied; and with the cold-blooded vindictiveness of the oriental, he came to gloat over the success of his revenge.

The Gipsy said something in a low tone to the Tamil.

"What does he say?" asked Schmidt, in a hoarse voice.

"That the police wait no longer. It is known to them that your honour is in the jungle, and they have begun their search. It is necessary for your excellency to hide."

In his fasting condition he was unable to think. His brain refused to act. It was not a question of leaving the jungle and seeking a way to the coast. He must remain in the forest, and find a hiding-place where the police were not likely to penetrate.

"Take me to the big rocks where the old man left me

last night," he said ; then, drawing two rupees from his pocket, he gave them to the syce. "Go and fetch me some food as quick as you can ; some hot-pot from the Gipsy camp will do. I must have some food at once, and something to drink."

"Very good, sir," replied the syce. "The Gipsy here will take your honour to the rocks, and I will go at once in search of something for master to eat."

He spoke to his companion and ordered him to guide the honourable gentleman to the shelter where he had passed the night, that he might lie down and sleep. The young snake-charmer wagged his head in assent, and started off at once. The path he took ascended and descended. At no point did it run level nor straight ; nor had it the appearance of being a track used by man. It was only one of the myriad game trails that intersected the forest.

Some of the ravines they crossed were warm and the air was still and close, as if it had lost the crispness of the invigorating breeze of the hilltops.

Schmidt plodded on painfully. He was weak and faint with want of food. The man in front had to wait now and then to allow him to come up.

"How much further ?" he asked several times.

"Only a little way," was the invariable reply, given in a dull mechanical voice, devoid of all emotion.

At last he stopped, unable to proceed any further. His knees trembled and his eyes felt as if they were full of blood. He stood swaying on his feet ; wondering stupidly where he was. He looked for his guide. The man had gone on ahead without noticing that his follower had come to a standstill, and he was nowhere to be seen. In a confused panic Schmidt wondered if he had passed his guide ; but he could not have done that.

In a dazed manner he turned round two or three times, looking first one way and then the other, till he was too bewildered to remember in which direction he had been moving. There was nothing to be done but to wait for his companion. When the Gipsy found that he was not following, the man would return. He would ask him to lend an arm, although it would be difficult for two to walk abreast. Perhaps with help he might drag on a little further.

The sun had passed down behind the mountains, and night was rapidly approaching. He no longer felt chilled as on the previous evening. The air, in spite of the coming twilight, continued soft and warm. He must have reached a lower altitude than the rocks where he slept the previous night.

Again he glanced round trying to make his observations; but his brain refused to act. He could only recall the fact that if he wandered into the low-country jungle, he would be hopelessly lost. He must try and move up rather than down. He glanced at the sky. It was purpling with the coming night. There were no clouds; that was fortunate, as it would mean fine weather. A tree would do for a shelter, he thought with relief. To climb again in search of the foot of the cliff was impossible. To-morrow he might be sufficiently rested to make another effort.

And now to find the tree. He concentrated his thoughts on his objective, and started to walk. For about ten minutes he managed to stagger along the rough uneven track, descending still deeper into the valley.

He arrived at a point where an enormous tree stood tolerably clear of jungle. The hot season had dried the vegetation beneath it, and rendered the surface of the ground dusty. He made his way to it, and threw himself down at its foot.

So exhausted was he with fatigue that he fell asleep at once and entered the land of dreams.

It was a strange uncanny world from which, whether waking or sleeping, he never again fully emerged. He had lost the power of distinguishing between the real and the unreal. He was beset with visions. Most of them were the fabrication of his brain. Those that were real were so mingled with fantasy that they might have been the creations of an exhausted mentality.

When he next opened his eyes to reality he was enveloped in a pall of darkness. Any sky that might have been visible was hidden by the canopy of foliage overhead; but though he could not see, he could hear. The forest was alive with sound. The mysterious night world of the tropical jungle was awake to all its activities with its strange invisible creatures unknown to the day.

The harsh cries of the night birds as they hunted their

reptile and rodent prey became part of his semiconscious dreams. The call of the prowling jackals and grunt of the jungle pig were added to the shrieks of the devil birds.

Large bats, with leathern wings, fluttered through the foliage of the tree overhead, and brushed down fragments of bark. A terrified beetle dropped from a bough with the thud of a small pebble. A snake glided by with no more sound than that of a rope being gently drawn over the dry soil.

From invisible holes in the ground came forth an unfamiliar crowd of living things to disport themselves under the dewy ferns and mosses with queer noises indicative of their share in the joy of life.

All night long the lost man lay in the heart of this thronged world, listening to the chorus of the darkness with its cries, its screams, its snappings and suckings and rustlings.

The first streak of dawn was a signal for the retirement of the prowlers of the night ; but the light that soon bathed the world did nothing towards dispelling his visions. It rather added to them. He glanced up at the tree above him. Its twisted branches suggested the chain of mopila snakes. He turned on his side and raised himself to his hands and knees, that he might crawl out of their reach. He tried to stand ; but stumbled over a root and fell.

The sun climbed over the jungle-covered hill, and shone upon him. In its dazzling light the place seemed peopled with huge unfamiliar shapes, while he felt himself dwindled to the small proportion of a jungle rat. The forest appeared to be peopled with antediluvian animals, monsters that reared themselves on massive hind legs against the tree, and browsed upon the foliage that was thirty or forty feet from the ground. A mastodon lunged into view from the undergrowth and turned a fiery eye upon him. Would it come and crush him under its huge feet ?

A nameless thing with a swollen snake's body and elongated neck waddled down the game track on short, inadequate legs, dragging a long tail after it.

Large armour-plated ant-eaters seemed to stop and examine him as he lay helpless, licking him with a horny tongue of hard rough texture.

The ghosts of the prehistoric forest passed away and

vanished. Men approached and stood looking down at him with solemn faces. Were they real, or did they, too, belong to primeval times? Somehow they were more familiar than the beasts he had seen. One of them—was it a woman?—stole near by herself, and gave him water to drink out of a cocoanut-shell.

Once he thought he saw the old snake-charmer. In abject tones he prayed him to have compassion on him, and call some of his tribesmen to carry him away. Even as he pleaded the form of the Gipsy changed into that of a gigantic cobra, which expanded its hood and gazed at him with baleful eyes. In his helplessness he screamed aloud, but no response came.

He was once more alone in the forest, imprisoned in its fastnesses, from which there was no hope of escape.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE pony came back late on Monday afternoon. The syce had a strange story to tell of having found the animal in a heated condition near the elephant rocks. Judging from the tracks the rider had pressed it at full speed to that point, and had then turned it loose to find its way back. It was fortunate that Fred did not require it to bring him home from Nellie Campbell's bungalow.

He had borrowed her pony again, and as he rode quietly back to Toona Kelli he had time for much reflection.

Nellie's greeting, when he first arrived at her house, was disturbing. She had kept up bravely until she saw the friend of her childhood. Then her self-restraint suddenly gave way, and the tears, so long repressed, flowed freely.

Profoundly moved at the sight of her distress, Fred did his best to comfort and console. Without knowing how it came about, he found her clinging to him, her arms round his neck, and his face bedewed by her tears. He held her kindly and gently, and let her cry, while he spoke words of comfort. Gradually the sorrowing daughter recovered her self-possession.

"You are very good to me, Fred!" she said, as soon as she could command her voice. "I don't know what I should do without you. I haven't many friends; and those I have are ever so far down the valley. They couldn't help me over business matters as you are doing."

"I am glad to be of use. Don't cry, Nellie dear. I can't bear to see you cry!"

"He was such a good father as well as companion and friend. I don't know how I shall get on without him. It will be very lonely." And the blue eyes filled yet again to overflowing.

"We won't let you be lonely. Gay and I will see to that. You will be too busy for one thing. You will have to carry on all your father's work until we can find some one to act as superintendent—not an easy thing in these days when most of the men have gone home to the war."

"I don't want any superintendent but you, Fred," said Nellie, with a touch of her old spirit.

Goldenham was silent for a space, and then he said—

"I'll do my best to run the place for you. As a matter of fact, I don't believe that you need any help. You're perfectly capable of doing the work yourself; but you must have an assistant."

"I don't mind the idea of an assistant if you will act as visiting agent," said Nellie, more cheerfully.

"Charnes and I will gladly do that for you. As your father's executors it will be our duty to do it, until the estate is handed over to you, and you release us from the executorship."

"I shall not release you, Fred, from your duty as an old friend." She laid a stress on the word "you." "I have no brother. I look to you to fill that position in my present trouble. I am sure my father would be pleased to think that I am in such safe hands."

"He knew what he was about when he left his daughter and his estate in our care; and you may be sure that we shall not betray the trust," responded Fred, warmly; he meant every word he said.

Nellie was not aware of what had passed between him and Helen. Perhaps if she had comprehended their intention she might not have spoken out so plainly nor made the demand on Fred. She was of a practical turn of mind, and had no leaning towards romantic sentiment. At the same time she was devotedly attached to Goldenham, with never a pang of jealousy on account of any other woman, until Helen appeared on the scenes. Somehow she could not imagine Fred in love with a strange girl; still more difficult was it to picture any one in love with him with his lameness and general delicacy of health. By and by, in the fulness of time, there would be an understanding between them; he would ask and she would give. Just now any talk of love and marriage was impossible. It would be out

of place, and in a sort of way disloyal to her father's memory. But it was certain that if Nellie pictured herself in the future at all, it was not as a lone woman managing an estate indefinitely, but in partnership with Fred. She rose suddenly from her chair.

"It is time you were off," she said. "You are tired. Come and see me to-morrow. It will be something to look forward to."

She placed her hand in his. Somehow the forlorn little figure in black appealed strongly to Goldenham's pity. Without considering what the action might imply, he put his arm round her shoulder and gave her a brotherly kiss, just such a kiss as he had given her in bygone days when she was nothing more than a flapper and he little more than a good-natured boy of twenty.

She returned the kiss gratefully and as spontaneously as Gay herself might have done.

"Thank you, Fred! You have cheered me up and helped me to bear this terrible blow that has fallen on me so unexpectedly. I am deeply grateful."

She put her handkerchief to her eyes and left him. The pony was waiting at the verandah steps; in another minute he was in the saddle and riding down the long path through the tea which came almost to the very door of the bungalow.

What a dear little woman she was to accept his help in that friendly way! In the few hours he had spent with her she seemed to have drawn close to him as a real lovable sister. She was less independent than Gay, and yet she was more self-reliant. She leaned upon him and accepted his counsel without once calling in question the wisdom of it as his sister would have done. Never once did the thought occur to him that Helen might have something to say to the arrangement he had made regarding the management of the estate. Helen, with her gentle, loving nature, could not be otherwise than ready to help the poor bereaved child. Fred had much to learn concerning the ways of women. With his thoughts thus pleasantly occupied, he encountered Geoffry as the latter walked moodily towards the Wanna Wella bungalow.

They stopped and chatted for a few minutes. There

was very little more news to add to what had already been related in the newspapers. Fred was eager to tell Geoffry of his own doings with regard to Nellie, and to point out that there was no necessity for her to give up the estate for the present.

"Nellie knows quite as much about the work in the tea-house as we do. As for the office work, she has practically carried it on for her father for some time past, she tells me. What we must do is to find her an assistant, a man who can get up at five in the morning and go to roll-call, look after the weeders and pruners and pluckers, and see that her orders are carried out."

Geoffry, in ignorance of what had passed between Fred and Helen, warmly assented; he tried not to smile at a certain forecasting of the future which presented itself to his mind.

"She is a wonderfully capable woman," he said. "And she is also marvellously self-possessed. She never once broke down all through that terrible time at Kandy when her father was carried to the cemetery and she followed as chief mourner. I wished, as we were standing at the grave, that the tears would come. It wasn't natural."

"Ah! well; they came to-day when I saw her on arrival, and again when I was coming away. Poor little girl! I feel so sorry for her all alone in that big bungalow."

"She has a good old ayah."

"What's an ayah when a woman is in real trouble?" replied Fred, scornfully, with the conviction that no one could sympathize as he himself could. "I was sorry to have to leave her. What she wants is the companionship of some one who understands her. I am afraid Gay could not be spared with all the children here, or she might have gone and stayed with her a few days."

Geoffry did not reply. He made a move as if to proceed on his way.

"Wait a bit, Geoff. Can you come up to-morrow morning and go through some papers with me? They are Campbell's. Nellie gave them to me to-day. She says we ought to read them as we are the executors."

"I rather want to see to things at Wanna Wella——"

"Then come in the afternoon. You can't be doing

estate work all day. I shall expect you some time after tiffin, and you must stay to dinner," said Fred, decisively, as he started the pony off.

"Very well," acquiesced Geoffry. He was thinking more of his interview with Gay than business with Fred. The sooner he got it over, the better it would be for his peace of mind and probably for hers as well. She herself had spoken of "an explanation" and made an appointment for the next day, when he supposed she would explain how it was that she was in another man's arms in the forest.

There was no doubt about the fact. He had seen her sitting on the pony and the man standing close to her. Not only were his arms about her, but hers were round his shoulders. She could not deny it if he taxed her with it; for he had witnessed the little episode with his own eyes. True, the couple were some distance away, and the man's back was towards him; but for all that the situation was clear.

It had startled him; and at first sight roused a fierce flame of anger against the man. He was seized with an impulse to go forward and use his stick. But the animal instinct passed as suddenly as it came; and a sense of chivalrous honour supervened. He must not stay to look on at what the chief actors believed to be a private meeting.

He had turned back immediately, and waited at the stables where Helen had joined him. He had been told by her that Gay had ridden into the forest, and he walked up the path to meet his little chum with the confidence of the accepted lover. No cloud shadowed his joy as he went with springing steps up the hill. The forest lying in the warm tropical sun seemed in sympathy with his happiness. Life for him was steeped in gold; he trod on air rather than on earth.

Then came that vision of his little chum in another man's arms.

The light of the brilliant day darkened; the warmth of the sun turned to a cold, grey chill, and his heart stood still.

Never in his life had he received such a shock. Had he not seen it he could not have believed it possible. Her letters were surely the sweetest ever written by woman to gladden a lover's heart. At that very moment they rested in his inner breast pocket, treasures too precious to be parted with.

They spoke of the awakening of a wonderful love. She gave responsively and freely of her best, a gift that he had believed was exclusively his own.

Now it seemed that it was only a make-believe; the "gathering of scalps" as she might have called it; a victory to be added to a list. He wished he could disbelieve his own eyes; but when she came out of the forest with the man's arm still resting on the back of the saddle—but discreetly removed from her waist—how could he continue to doubt the testimony of his sight?

Was it for this reason that she had refused to allow herself to be engaged? Was it to give Smith time and opportunity to speak? Surely, surely his little chum could not be such a schemer, such an accomplished intriguer, such an outrageous flirt! The mere thought of it hurt him beyond measure.

Gay had begged him to stay to dinner, and had taken it for granted that he would do so. He had pleaded fatigue; and he left her with the impression that he meant to turn in early.

She would have been astonished and puzzled if she could have seen him sitting up far into the night, wakeful and restless; now pacing the lonely hall, now sitting back in his long-armed chair trying to fix his attention on a book, unrested and thoroughly miserable.

But Gay had little time for thought concerning her own affairs that evening.

Fred found Helen waiting for him on the path leading through his own estate to the bungalow. He came upon her suddenly. His thoughts had been entirely with Nellie; Helen had slipped from his mind altogether.

"Ah! Helen! This is kind of you!" he cried, as he dismounted and told the syce to lead the pony back to Miss Campbell's house.

"Have you had a very tiring day?" she asked, with the sympathetic solicitude that has its fascination for the unmarried man.

"Not so tiring as—as—" he did not know how to express what he meant. It had been emotional rather than fatiguing, but it was difficult to say in what way.

"Did you see Miss Campbell?"

Helen always called her Miss Campbell. Somehow she never felt disposed to fall into the familiarity of using the Christian name.

"I've been with her all day. Poor girl! She is frightfully cut up over the death of her father."

"Naturally," remarked Helen. "You would not wish her to be callous and indifferent over such a loss."

"Geoffry says that she behaved nobly down at Kandy, and never once gave way. As soon as she saw me she melted into tears. Poor child! I was so sorry for her."

"I dare say it did her good. All women find relief in a good cry."

"Well! she had it, I can assure you; but she pulled herself together after a time, and we got through a lot of business."

"I suppose she will be going back to England as soon as she can get a passage."

"Not a bit of it!" responded Fred warmly. "That isn't Nellie! She will stay on for the present and run the estate. She asks me to be visiting agent. Of course I am very glad to accept the post, and I shall make it purely honorary."

"You! Oh, Fred! You're not strong enough for it. You can only just run Toona Kelli. When——" Helen blushed and hesitated. "By and by I mean to take some of the office work off your shoulders. It is possible that I may also be able to assist you in the supervision of some of the out-door and tea-house work as well."

"I shouldn't like to see you doing that," protested Fred.

"I can't have you risking your health by adding to your labours. See how exhausted you are after the little extra you have done this week," said Helen, with an authority that was by no means distasteful to the man at her side. His halting walk as he climbed the estate path corroborated all that she said.

"I must help Nellie!" he replied rather feebly.

"There's no must about it," cried Helen, with rising excitement. "She has no claim on you!"

Helen slipped her hand in his arm with an affectionate little gesture that had its attraction and brought back to his mind the relationship between them.

"You are very good to me. I don't feel worthy of you," he said, as he looked into her handsome face, and realized his good fortune in having drawn to himself the love of such a capable woman.

They walked on in a silence that said even more than words. She felt that he was dead tired by the dragging of his steps.

"You ought to have ridden all the way home, and not attempted this walk. It was selfish of me to allow you to get off the pony," said Helen, presently. "Shall we stop and rest on this bank?"

"We must push on. Look at the clouds. We shall have another storm to-night; but it will be later, and we shall not have much lightning and thunder. We want another downpour for the tea. Did you make any attempt to-day to meet Gay's impostor?"

"I offered to go with her into the forest, but she said she wanted to ride—not walk——"

"That reminds me I must get you a pony," he interrupted.

"All in good time, dear. We must see what Gay intends to do."

"Tell me what Gay did to-day."

"She went off directly after tiffin, and she came back bringing Mr. Smith with her. Gay seems on very good terms with him. Mr. Charnes arrived before she returned, and asked where she was. When I told him that she had ridden up the ridge he started off to meet her. But he did not wait in the forest. They met at the stables."

"Is there anything between Gay and Geoffry, any understanding?"

"I could see no sign of it. Mr. Charnes was very tired, and evidently in a hurry to get back to his bungalow."

"And what about Smith? Had he come to see Gay?"

"I shouldn't like to say. He didn't look at all happy, and it crossed my mind that Gay had refused him."

"And she did not meet her loafer in the jungle?"

"She said nothing about it, so we may suppose that she drew a blank."

"We must clear that matter up before we make our engagement known to the world," remarked Fred.

Helen's face wore an anxious expression. Never for a moment since Gay spoke had Noel Loveden been out of her mind.

"Of course, and fully satisfy Gay on the subject. It won't do for her to be looking askance at me. I feel that she will never receive me as a real sister-in-law until my widowhood is proved."

Fred glanced round at the storm that was gathering.

"I think we must hurry. It may come on to rain at any minute," he said, quickening his steps. "Let me have your arm, Helen. I shall get on better that way."

It was twilight before they arrived at the bungalow. The lightning occasionally played over the cloud, but it did not flash overhead. The lamps were lighted, and the curtains drawn. The children had gone to their rooms, and under Gay's and Catherine's supervision they were preparing for what they called their "biddy-bo."

By the time they were tucked under the mosquito curtains, the dressing-bell rang, and their elders retired to their own rooms to prepare for dinner.

The rain fell heavily, but without any great crash of thunder to alarm the little ones this time. They were soon asleep; once in the land of dreams it would have required something unusually startling to awaken them.

Dinner was again a quiet function as far as conversation was concerned. The downpour on the wooden roof was noisy and drowned their voices at first. Gradually the storm lessened in fury, and they could hear themselves speak without shouting.

Gay was silent and abstracted. She was still puzzling her brains over Geoffry's strange behaviour. In vain she tried to find a reason for it. She was not conscious of having given him offence in any way. His last letter, received only yesterday, was full of love and happy anticipation of their meeting. Never in her life had she seen him so depressed, so unlike himself. She could only conclude that something had occurred at Kandy to make him anxious and pre-occupied. She recalled an expression let drop by John Smith that hinted at his possible detention there on account of his own personal business. Was it money trouble? or labour trouble connected with the estate? or was it some

unsatisfactory news about the shipping of his tea? It was of no use trying to guess; she must have patience. Her thoughts were abruptly dispersed by Fred.

"Gay, you took your afternoon ride as usual, Helen tells me. Did you meet any one in the jungle?"

Gay glanced for a brief moment at Catherine, who had been left in ignorance of the developments of the last few days.

"Mr. Smith was passing down the forest on his way to his bungalow."

She thought it best not to mention Smith's extraordinary action in riding back into the forest instead of proceeding to his house.

"Any one else?" asked Fred, who was not interested in Smith's movements.

"A stranger who was going up the ridge."

"The same man you met before?"

Gay nodded her head, but made no comment.

"Did you ask him if we could show him any hospitality?"

As Gay did not reply immediately, Fred continued, addressing his remarks to Catherine. "Ours is the last house—or first—on this side of the jungle for the traveller; and if he wants a meal, either going or coming, and a couple of hours rest, he can have it." He turned to Gay again. "I hope you made the stranger understand that we should be happy to entertain him if he wished to stop."

"I begged him to come in; he seemed so tired and worn out. At first he was inclined to accept my invitation; but just as we were starting from the place where I met him, Mr. Smith unfortunately came in sight on his way down. The stranger was shy of being seen—I suppose on account of his travel-worn appearance—and he turned back into the forest by one of the game tracks used by the Gipsies and disappeared."

While she spoke Helen's eyes were fixed upon her with a strange wistfulness. Fred noted the expression and sighed. Was she slipping from him almost before he could fully realize his good fortune?

"Probably he is known to Smith, and was afraid of being recognized," he said. "Did he give you the same name as when you met him before?"

"He answered to the name when I used it."

"We must sift this matter to the bottom," declared Fred, as they rose from the table. "I don't like the thought of a European loafer hanging about these jungles. He is evidently hiding from the police. I must take means to clear up the mystery."

Gay smiled at Fred's assumption of authority. What with Helen on one side and Nellie on the other he was coming out in a new light. He, Helen, and Catherine went to the drawing-room, where a log fire blazed on the open hearth. The curtains were drawn, and a large standard lamp with a rose-coloured shade threw a soft light over the room.

Gay remained behind in the dining-room to speak to Pedro on a matter connected with the housekeeping. When she had given her orders she went to her room to find some needlework. Just now she felt that she could not sit idle; she must have something to occupy her thoughts.

She turned up the lamp and opened a drawer in her wardrobe to look for a half-finished pinafore that she was making for one of the children. As she stood by the open drawer her ear caught the faint sound of a tap on the glass portion of the door that opened on to the side verandah.

CHAPTER XXX

THE glass was shaded by a curtain of green silk, drawn at night, but pushed back during the day. The sound of fingertips tapping on the window was repeated. Her thoughts flew to two men, Loveden and Smith. It might be either.

She waited till the tap came yet again; then she unlocked and opened the door.

There was nobody. The light of the lamp streamed out into the darkness, which seemed like a wall in its density. The lamp illuminated the drops of water hanging on the foliage and on the blossoms of the fuchsias, the passion flowers, the bignonia and the tea roses growing in profusion just outside the verandah.

She went out into the covered way. The rain still fell gently. The lightning had ceased, and the forest no longer echoed with the thunder. The only sound to be heard above the tinkle of the rain, and the splash of the water as it dripped from the eaves of the wooden roof was a chorus of frogs.

"Is any one there?" she asked. Then, as no reply was forthcoming, she advanced to the edge of the top step, just short of the drip, and called softly, "Mr. Loveden! Mr. Loveden! Come in at once and let me shut the door. It is cold and wet, not fit for any one to be out in such a night."

A halting step sounded on the path, and a figure emerged from the darkness into the light that streamed through the open door. It was Loveden, tall, gaunt, and soaked to the skin. She ran out into the rain and took him by the arm.

"Come in at once! You are keeping me in the rain, and I have only a thin dress on. I shall be wet through in a minute."

She appealed to him as if he were a constant visitor and

trusted to his old instinct of courtesy to make him comply with her request. If once she could get him inside the room she believed that she could keep him there.

He responded mechanically to her request and entered the room. She shut the door, locked it and put the key in her pocket. A small wood fire burned upon the hearth. It seemed to draw the forlorn sodden figure like a magnet. He went to it stepping over the carpet with squelching boots that must have been filled with water.

"Sorry!" he murmured. "I'm not fit to come into a lady's room; but oh! I'm so cold!"

He shivered and extended his hands over the glowing wood.

"I am very glad you have come," replied Gay, wondering if she dared leave him for a moment while she called Fred.

"Could I have a little hot whisky and water?—but, whatever you do, don't call a servant! Is Schmidt here?" he asked, with sudden suspicion, his teeth chattering to such an extent that he could scarcely enunciate his words.

"No! no!" replied Gay, hastily. "He's miles away by this time."

"In the forest," he said, with the ghost of a chuckle. "The old snake-charmer will look after him and keep him away from this side of the hill. The Gipsy told me to come to you. He said I should be safe here and out of the rain; safer than in the forest where Schmidt is still hunting for me. Whose room is this?" he asked, glancing round at the bed.

"Mine, and you're welcome to it. No one will dare to enter my bedroom; least of all your enemy."

Her words comforted and reassured the poor fugitive, who cowered still closer over the fire.

"Dakshi was right. Schmidt will never dare to show his cursed face here."

"Why didn't you come before it began to rain? You are wet through. Let me call my brother and he will help you to change," said Gay.

"No! no! I trust no one but yourself. I will dry myself before the fire, and when the rain stops I will go back to Dakshi."

"You may trust my brother as you trust me. He will

bring the hot whisky and water, which you must have at once."

She moved towards the door. In a moment he was up and at her side. She allowed herself to be drawn back to the fire.

"Take off your coat," she said, as she would have spoken to Fred.

"If you don't mind, I should be glad to dry it."

She touched his sleeve and helped him to extricate himself from its sodden folds.

"Oh! you are wet! wet through, indeed! This means fever again. Now your waistcoat."

She hauled at the garment in question. The flannel shirt was in no better plight. She went to her wardrobe and took out a thick coarse tweed coat, which she threw over his shoulders. At that moment she heard a step in the passage. It was Fred's limp, and she thanked her lucky stars. Opening the door suddenly she said:

"Come in here, Fred! Quick! quick!"

In another second he was inside, and she had closed the door.

"This is my brother, Mr. Loveden. He will help you into some dry clothes which I will fetch."

She slipped away with all the speed available and brought back a dressing gown, a sleeping suit, and a dry flannel shirt. By this time ague had seized Loveden, and he shook so much that he could no longer stand. Fred needed no telling what to do.

"Get the whisky and water, Gay, and send Nurse Catherine with it. She will understand what is needed. Don't upset Helen."

Gay called Catherine from the drawing-room.

"An Englishman has just come in from the jungle. He has lost his way, and been caught in the storm. Put on your cap and apron. He will be in a high fever presently and will want a nurse."

In a very short time Loveden turned a startled glance to the opening door. He saw a hospital nurse enter with a tray. He clutched Fred by the arm.

"Who is she?" he whispered.

"Nurse Catherine. You may trust her. She will help you into bed."

"Is she English?"

"English? Of course she is, as English as you are."

By this time Catherine, with the experience of an old hand, had taken possession of the case. Almost before Gay could close the door after her, the nurse was divesting the patient of his wet garments, and was clothing him in the warm dry things provided by Gay from her brother's wardrobe. In ten minutes Loveden was tucked up in Gay's bed, a hot bottle at his feet, and the homely remedies that the bungalow could furnish, at his lips.

"Who are you?" asked Fred, staring down at the stranger.

"Noel Loveden. My wife is here, isn't she? Send her to me, Miss Goldenham," he pleaded, looking at Gay, who had returned to take away the wet clothes. "You promised that I should see her."

"I will go and fetch her," she replied, gathering up an armful of the cast-off garments.

Fred had become rather white. He glanced at Gay. The revelation of the stranger's identity had been a shock in spite of all that she had told him. He had clung to the belief that the loafer, as he had termed Loveden, was some unfortunate European in distress, who had got hold of the name and was using it. Gay understood what was in his mind. The moment had arrived for the identification of the man which might carry with it the wrecking of all his hopes.

"Stay where you are, Fred," said Gay, as she left the room and went swiftly to the drawing-room. Helen looked up as she entered, and a shadow of disappointment crossed her face as she saw that it was Gay, and not her brother.

"Where's Fred?" she asked. "He went off to get some matches for his cigarette. And where's Catherine?"

"They are both in my room. Helen, your husband has called in for shelter from the rain, and——"

"My husband, he is dead!" she interrupted in a sharp quick tone.

"Come and see for yourself."

"Where is he?" cried Helen, rising from her comfortable seat by the fire, the colour leaving her face.

"He is in my room; he came in through the garden."

Helen did not wait to hear more. She pushed past Gay,

and hurried to the bedroom. Opening the door she walked straight to the bed. Catherine had thrown up the mosquito curtain. The sick man looked up at her, and lifted his thin arms. She stared at him with unrecognizing eyes.

"Helen! Lennie, my Lennie!" he cried in a broken voice.

A man may be changed in appearance, but his voice remains the same. It is impossible to disguise it. It was the case now.

Helen dropped on her knees by the bed and flung her arms about him.

"Noel, my husband! Noel, darling! You have come back from the dead!"

Fred and Gay left the room, and the sister softly put her arm round the brother with a sympathy she found impossible to put into words.

* * * * *

Gay was in the garden with the children on the following afternoon. There was a delicious scent of blossom in the air. The rain had set every plant quivering with fresh life and springing sap. The watcher could almost see the growth from hour to hour in some of the more tender trailing creepers. Excepting for the ayahs and Rodrigues, the children's man servant, she was alone with them.

Fred had gone to the Campbell estate. Catherine and Helen were in charge of the invalid, and Dr. Caversham had come, and was paying a long visit. It had been impossible to get him up to Toona Kelli before the afternoon. A messenger had been sent at daybreak, and he had brought back written instructions and a bottle of medicine in answer to Catherine's explicit note.

The Doctor arrived to find the patient with a high temperature, but free from excitement and nervousness.

"If he hadn't come to the bungalow for shelter he would have died," he said. "What was he doing out there in the forest?"

Catherine explained the circumstances, for Gay had found it necessary to tell a part of the story. She omitted all mention of the manner in which Loveden had lost his eye. It was easily believed that the accident had been caused by shrapnel during the fighting. When Loveden recovered he

might give them as much of his history as he chose ; but for the present it was enough to say that he had escaped from Germany ; and after frightful privation had arrived in Ceylon, where he had left his wife and children. It was evident to the Doctor that he was suffering from a species of shell-shock which drove him into hiding ; and that the approach of the monsoon with torrential showers had obliged him to go to the bungalow where he chanced to hear that his wife was staying.

"Is it likely that Mr. Loveden will try to get into the forest again ?" asked Catherine of Dr. Caversham, as they went into the deserted drawing-room.

"Not in the least likely. The stuff I am giving him will quiet the nerves."

"Miss Goldenham has removed his clothes and his boots, I find. That is one way of preventing him from starting on another wild-goose chase. Shall we be able to pull him through ?" she asked a little anxiously. Her experience enabled her to understand how very ill he was.

"I think and hope so : but, of course, I cannot tell at present. We'll do our best, you and I, to get him on his legs again."

The rest of the conversation concerned no one but themselves.

It was in the garden under the orange trees that Geoffry found Gay, surrounded by the children. She looked up with a smile of welcome as he approached, and pointed to a garden chair. She was in the middle of a story to which the children were listening with rapt attention.

"Yes, Gay ! Go on !" cried Betty, who was sitting on her lap.

"I am in charge," she explained. "Catherine and Helen are both busy in the house."

"Please go on, Gay dear !" pleaded another child, who was hanging on the back of her chair.

"Yes, do ; we shall have plenty of time for our talk when the children go to tea," said Geoffry.

He had come to the conclusion after twenty-four hours' hard thinking, that whatever Gay might do, however much she might pain him, he would have to forgive her. He could not put her out of his life, and cut himself adrift in anger.

After all, she should come first. If she could be happy with such a man as Smith, then he must do his best to forget all that had passed, including the mad week of love and hope and faith that had been blasted in one fiery moment of illumination.

But Smith! the man was not worthy of her! Rumour, moreover, was already connecting his name in an unpleasant manner with the sedition of the Sinhalese.

Geoffrey had arrived at Toona Kelli after a night of self-discipline in a kindly frame of mind, having himself well in hand. He assumed the old attitude of friendliness and resolutely controlled every word and look. He sat at ease now in his wicker chair, and tried to put back the clock. Gay was in her teens once more, and he was the friend of her youth; not the lover of her womanhood. He reminded himself of the difference of age between them, and blamed himself for his folly in thinking that he could bridge the years and bring himself on a level with a girl of twenty.

The task of retracing his steps was not easy. Under the warmth of the love he had poured out so freely in his letters, she had expanded like one of the flowers of her forest. There was a subtle change. The old light-hearted self-devoted Gay was gone, and in her place was a new Gay, infinitely sweeter and more alluring.

Was he right in coming thus like a moth to the candle to singe his wings again? Gay's voice broke into his ruminations.

"And when the brave prince had killed all his enemies——"

"Were they Germans?" asked one of the boys.

"Yes; all Germans; he walked out of the jungle and sat down to rest because he was very tired."

"Did you find him in the jungle?"

"I found him resting. He is big and tall and very thin, because he is so strong. He has only one eye; but it doesn't matter. He can see better with one eye than we can with two."

"Can he see as far as this?" asked Betty.

"I think so, because he asked if Billy and Norman were good boys."

Gay looked at the two little pickles, who at once gave themselves away.

"It was Billy's fault that I was naughty. He told me that I might play with water, and you wouldn't be angry, Gay!" said Norman, penitently.

"Ah, well! the prince knows that you didn't mean to be naughty," said Gay, consolingly. "When he had finished the story of his fights, he said he felt very lonely; and he asked me if I would let him be Daddy to a nice little boy and girl. I said I would think about it."

"Can he be my Daddy?" asked Norman.

"You have a father already; he is in Colombo."

Norman's face fell. He had never heard of a little boy having two daddies, and he felt that it was useless to pursue the subject.

"Can I have him for mine?" asked another child.

Gay shook her head. "You mustn't be greedy; you have a father too."

"I haven't got a father, because mine died fighting the Germans," cried Billy. "When I grow up, I'm going to die fighting the Germans. Gay, dear! can't I have him?"

The young rogue laid his cheek against her arm, and looked up at her with pleading brown eyes.

"I thought of you; but there was that unfortunate water business," replied Gay, with due solemnity.

"Dearest! we didn't mean to be naughty. We were only seeing who could spit the water furthest!"

"Shocking! Did you ever hear of such naughtiness?" said Gay, turning to Geoffry, who found it difficult to preserve a becoming gravity. "They were wet through from their chins to their waists, and we had to change their smocks."

"I'm afraid Billy would be rather a handful," answered Geoffry. "But if your prince can see so well with his one eye, he will be able to see all Billy's mischief. It might be a good thing to give him a one-eyed father." Then he lowered his voice. "Gay! what are you talking about?"

"She's telling us about her forest prince," said one of the elder girls. "He's such a brave man, and she does love him so!"

A smile was in Gay's eyes, but her lips were quite serious as she continued.

"I hope I didn't do wrong. I promised to let him be Daddy to Billy and Betty because they haven't got a father. The rest of you have all got fathers."

"Only ours have got two eyes ! I want one with one eye," complained a small child, beginning to scent a piece of favouritism on Gay's part.

"And Billy has got a one-eyed geegee already. Gay, darling ! it isn't fair," said one of the little girls.

"And my Daddy can't see properly even though he has two eyes," chimed in another. "He has to wear glasses, and he's always losing them."

"Was he pleased when you told him ?" asked Betty.

"Very pleased ; he put his arm round me like this as I sat upon the pony and said, ' You are very good and kind to me ! ' Then I asked him to come back with me to see Billy and Betty ; but he shook his head. ' I don't want to frighten the children,' he said. ' I will come after they are asleep. You must tell them about me.' So last night the prince came down the forest path in the rain, when you were all asleep. He knocked at my verandah door, and I let him in. Poor prince ! he was so cold and wet ! I called Nurse Catherine, and she gave him some warm dry clothes and put him into bed."

"Into your bed, Gay ?"

"Yes ; my bed ; and I slept in Nurse Catherine's, because she had to sit up all night with the prince."

"When can we see our new Daddy ?" asked Betty.

"I don't know, dear. Doctor Caversham and Nurse Catherine will say when. They are talking about it now."

"They have to put their heads very close together when they talk about sick people," said Betty.

"And the Doctor holds Nursie's hand tight so she can't run away when he is speaking," said another.

"Nursie gets so red ! I don't think she likes being held," remarked a third.

It all poured out in a stream, and Gay could not stem the tide of comment. The little people were close observers although they were unable to read the signs. She caught Geoffry's puzzled look and went off in a peal of laughter. Billy gazed at her without moving a muscle. As soon as he could make himself heard he said :

"You will marry the prince, won't you, Gay ?"

"No, Billy ! Not I ! How can I marry him if he is to be your Daddy ? What should we do with Mummie ?"

"She must marry him too," said soft-hearted little Betty, who was not going to have any one left out in Gay's fairy tale.

"I shall give him up to Mummie," said Gay generously.

"Even though you found him all by yourself?"

"Yes. Now let's have a game in the shade." She put Betty down and rose from her chair. The child protested, demanding to be taken at once to see her new Daddy. "You must wait, little one; the prince is still asleep. Come along, Geoff. You take the boys, and I'll take the girls, and we'll see how many prisoners we can make."

They had a big romp until Gay, breathless with running, dropped into her chair.

"Do tell me the meaning of your wonderful story?" he asked, as he seated himself by her side.

"I can't now. Look! Here comes Fred. Ask him, and he will tell you who the prince is."

Goldenham, who was just returning from Nellie's house, greeted Geoffry warmly.

"So glad you have come! I've got such a lot to talk about. Nellie wants to know if she may——"

Gay lost the rest of the sentence as the two men walked away towards the bungalow. She saw no more of them till the tea-bell rang. Geoffry, with Dr. Caversham and Nurse Catherine, joined her in the drawing-room. Fred took his tea in his room, and Helen remained with her husband.

CHAPTER XXXI

As soon as tea was over there were shouts for Gay from the children.

"You promised, Gay—you promised!" was the chorus.

"What did I promise, you little pickles?"

"That you would take us to the tea-house and let us see the big wheel."

The big wheel, worked by a turbine with the leather strap that turned the machinery, was a never-failing source of interest and amusement to the little ones. The factory held other delights as well.

"May I come too?" asked Geoffry, looking at Gay.

"If you like. Have you finished your business with Fred?"

"For the present."

Charnes did not offer to go with the children because he wanted their company. At this present moment he would gladly have dispensed with them all. He wanted Gay to himself. The longer the promised explanation was deferred the more he craved for it. Was he never to find her alone and with a quiet minute to devote to their own affairs? Whether he liked it or not it was his turn now to "wait and see."

Fred had told him briefly that Noel Loveden had arrived like one from the grave; that he had escaped from imprisonment in Germany; that he was suffering from shell-shock; and that he was lying very ill in Gay's own room. For further details he referred Geoffry to Gay herself, saying that he wanted to talk about Nellie's business.

Then there was the story Gay was telling the children, of how she discovered the one-eyed prince in the forest, and how, she said, "He put his arms round me as I sat on the pony, like this."

The hot blood flew to Geoffry's face, and his heart gave a bound as a suspicion shot through him that, after all, his

eyes might have deceived him, not as to the fact that some one was standing by the pony, but as to that person's identity. He had jumped to a conclusion on seeing Smith with Gay as she came out of the forest ; and only now did the thought strike him that the figure clasping Gay in his arms might not have been Smith, but some one else ; some one who did not matter as far as the vital issue of his love was concerned.

They started with the children. There was not much time to spare for the walk, as the sun would set in an hour, and it would be necessary to return to the house.

The tea-factory was built by the side of the river below the bungalow. The path to it was a steep slope with a few zigzags. No sooner was the party out of the garden than the children began to run. Rodrigues managed to keep abreast with the boys. The two ayahs shepherded the stragglers behind. Gay and Geoffry found themselves alone.

"Fred told you of the coming of Mr. Loveden ?" said Gay in the frank cheerful manner of old, a manner that had its attractions in those days, but which now seemed to rise up as a barrier between them in their new relations.

"He outlined the bare facts, but said that I must come to you for the details ; he had no time to tell me. Nellie's affairs are of vital consequence apparently to Fred, and nothing else matters."

"Dear old Fred ! He is so accustomed to be taken care of and fussed over by others that it is something quite novel and exciting to find the tables turned, and himself fussing over a lonely woman who needs his care."

"Where did you discover Loveden ?"

"In the jungle, where under the influence of shell-shock and something else, he was in hiding."

"May I know the story ?" he asked.

"I am going to tell you everything," she said after a slight pause. "I was not able to do this with Fred ; but I intended from the very beginning to make a clean breast of it to you. I badly wanted your advice at one time, but things moved of themselves. It is said that every unanswered letter answers itself in time ; so my difficulty was solved without counsel."

Then she related the history of Loveden from the time

he was taken prisoner. The only item she omitted for the present was the name of his pursuer. Even now Gay was inclined to give Smith the benefit of the doubt; she only connected him with Loveden on that occasion when his sudden appearance in the jungle had given the poor fugitive a fit of nerves, and caused him to rush away in one of those uncontrollable panics that accompany shell-shock. The sight of a cooly had had the same effect.

"It was on Sunday, the day before yesterday, that Mr. Loveden confessed to me who he was. It came as a surprise and a shock to me. Imagine my horror when on my return from the jungle, Fred announced his engagement to Helen! It left me dumb for a minute. I could only gasp out the word, 'Impossible!' After hearing what had happened between the two, I knew I had only one course to follow. I had to face the music and tell them that Helen was not a widow."

"Did you do it?"

"I did, and was not believed. They thought I was romancing, and that I had been imposed upon by some loafing scamp who was hiding from the police."

"Poor little chum!" said Geoffry softly.

"Then yesterday, as I told you, I met Mr. Loveden again and made him understand that his wife was here staying with me in the bungalow. He was very much moved, poor fellow, to think that his wife and children were so near, and that his wife was actually wearing mourning for him. He had a bad breakdown. I did my best to console him, and I rather fancy that it did him good. It took his thoughts off himself, and relieved the pressure on his brain. He was quite prepared to come home with me when Mr. Smith——"

"Oh, Gay, do come this way!" cried Betty, issuing from the door of the tea-house with consternation written on her face. "Billy is putting that silly little cry-baby, Pearl, into a tea-box, and is covering her with tea to send her to England——"

Gay did not wait to hear more. She was off like a clucking old hen to rescue Pearl, a fairy of five years, from her entombment. She had to shake the tea out of her curls as well as calm the fears of the terrified mite.

There was disorder in the big packing-room. The tea-maker and his assistants stood looking on in helpless laughter, for the mischief being done under Billy's leadership was not beyond repair. The ayahs were beaten off by Helen's young hopeful, who flung handfuls of tea at them.

Rodrigues, who might have coped with Billy's activities by sheer force, was holding tight on to Norman. Prompted by Billy, Norman's one desire at the moment was to crawl into the sirocco, where the tea was fired, to "see what it was like."

Geoffry ran to his assistance, and removed the protesting child, while Rodrigues headed off others bent on the same object. Then there was a romp in the withering-room, a delightful place for hide-and-seek among the great stacks of trays that reached nearly to the ceiling. Gay and Geoffry had to join to captain the two parties. This was a tolerably safe spot as there was no opportunity of getting into mischief. When tired of this game, they made a beeline, led by Billy, for the fermenting shed, and hands were dipped into the warm moist masses lying in the hods. Each fist extracted a little ball of juicy leaves. In view of bathing operations which would presently take place on going to bed, they were allowed to carry away their spoil.

They were not often permitted to visit the tea-house; but when the treat was given it partook of the nature of a wild and exhilarating orgy, never to be forgotten.

As the sun touched the edge of the hill they left the factory. The untiring little feet scampered up the path towards the bungalow in the same order in which they came down, Billy leading and Pearl with the ayahs behind. Gay and Geoffry followed.

Gay had broken off her story abruptly with the mention of Smith's name. Geoffry went straight back to that point; it was of Smith that he wanted to speak. At the same time he was finding it more and more difficult to say what was burning in his mind. It was nothing less than that he wished her well and desired her happiness before all things. At the same time he felt impelled to tell her that circumstances were developing which might involve Smith in serious trouble.

"So Loveden was nervous about meeting Smith, and bolted. What was he afraid of?"

Gay paused; then she determined to tell him all. Half confidences were no good.

"He believed that he was a German agent."

Geoffry did not make any comment. He hoped by his silence that she would understand that he shared Loveden's belief. Gay took up the threads of her story and explained the reason for the fugitive's fears. Then she described Loveden's arrival in the rain, wet and soaked to the skin and shivering with fever.

"If he wasn't actually pursued after I met him yesterday, he must have imagined it. He has dropped words that make Nurse Catherine believe that he was desperately hunted."

"Did he mention the name of his pursuer?"

"He talks of Johann Schmidt."

"German for John Smith." Geoffry looked at Gay and took the plunge. "Of course I can't presume to say for certain that the two are one and the same person; but I think you ought to know that the police have reason for believing that our friend John Smith is nothing less than a German agent and a German spy."

"Quite likely," responded Gay, undisturbed by the information. "After all, we none of us know much about him. But as to a fiendish design to blind a man who personally has done him no harm, it is a little difficult to believe. On Sunday I was in the jungle and Mr. Smith overtook me. He said he was on his way to Asseri's village. He sat down to rest for ten minutes by my side; and while we talked I saw him, tired as he was, get up and put a large beetle on its legs. I accused him of being fond of dumb things. He replied that he did not love them; but all the same he could not stand by and see them suffer or struggle without wishing to help them. It seems impossible that such a man could be hounding poor Mr. Loveden to blind him! I don't like Mr. Smith, as you know, but I must be just and give the devil his due!"

Geoffry stared at her in perplexity. He had been so convinced that it was Smith who was standing by the pony that he could not get rid of the impression all at once. It was being slowly born in upon his mind that he had made a

hideous mistake. Yes; it was Loveden he had seen, and not Smith. What a fool he had been! How thankful he was that he had not rushed into angry speech and allowed her to see the unworthy suspicion that was in his mind! He dared not speak lest he should betray himself. He must be patient and wait for an opportunity of re-establishing his position. Then, if Heaven was kind to him, she would ask no questions, but accept his worship and homage without demanding an explanation.

"Are the police after Mr. Smith?" asked Gay, who was looking towards the vanishing troop of children. "I say! We must hurry up! We want to keep the bungalow fairly quiet, and one never knows from one hour to another what Billy and his devoted admirer and follower, Norman, may be up to."

She quickened her steps and hastened on.

"The police have reason to believe that Smith supplied the Sinhalese with arms and fanned the spirit of rebellion," said Geoffry.

"That is a more likely tale than Mr. Loveden's; but the strange part about it is that the old Gipsy said exactly the same thing—that Mr. Smith was hunting him down to destroy the remaining eye. It is far more likely that Mr. Smith went back to the forest yesterday to elude the police than to hunt Mr. Loveden."

"Did he go back?"

"Yes; he rode the pony at a great pace to the elephant rocks, and then turned it loose to find its way home. The syce met it and led it home. Who is this riding up the estate path to the bungalow?" she asked, as she caught sight of a figure in dark blue. "Why! it's a police Superintendent. Geoffry, you stay and see him. I'll hurry on after the children."

Charnes waited till the officer came up. A short conversation took place, and the Superintendent turned back without coming on to the bungalow. He had learned what he wanted to know, and had no time to waste, for it was getting late.

Geoffry strode on up the garden path. Oh! for just ten minutes alone with his little chum! Would he get it? By the time he reached the bungalow she had disappeared with her flock. He sighed and resigned himself

X

to the inevitable. Her many nursery duties would keep her busy for some time, and she would not appear till the dinner-bell rang.

He found Caversham at a loose end, and carried him off to Fred's sitting-room, where the three men smoked and two of them discussed Loveden's strange adventures. Charnes found that he knew more than his companions, thanks to Gay's confidences. He relapsed into silence and left them to do the talking. He reported his interview with the police officer.

"It will go hard with Smith if they can prove that he supplied the arms," said Caversham. "I am not sure that he won't be shot."

"Can they catch him?" asked Fred.

"I don't see how he can get away from an island like this," remarked the doctor.

Helen was not present at the dinner table. She had offered to stay with the invalid, who could not be left. As soon as dinner was over Nurse Catherine hurried back to relieve her, and Caversham made the patient an excuse to follow. Gay with Geoffry and Fred went into the drawing-room. Before settling down to his cigarette, Fred excused himself and went back to the dining-room. He wanted to see Helen, with whom he had had no opportunity of speaking privately since the bombshell had fallen and altered the conditions of their relationship. He found her in the dining-room, sitting down to a belated dinner.

"Oh, Helen! haven't you had anything to eat yet. I thought we sent some food to you," he said, seating himself in his old place at the head of the table close to her.

"Pedro brought me a tray; but I told him I should prefer to wait if he would keep the dinner warm. He has done so, and just given me some delicious soup," she said, self-possessed and undisturbed by the whirl of recent events.

"May I stay with you and keep you company?" he asked.

"That will be very nice of you," she replied, with a grateful glance.

Somewhat to his surprise she showed no sign of being confused or disconcerted at finding herself alone with him.

"I—I hope your husband is better. I've been away all day and very busy, as you may imagine."

"I'm sure that you will overtax your strength, Fred, as I have told you before," she said calmly. "You're not strong, and you have many things to worry you. I am afraid that I have been a disturbance in your life. I hope you will forgive me."

"Forgive you!" he exclaimed. "There is nothing to forgive. How could we know that your husband was alive?"

"We couldn't. After the letters I received from the War Office I never dreamt that it was possible. You won't think badly of me, will you?"

"Indeed not!" he protested. "Why should I? I shall always look upon you as one of the noblest and best of women. You were too good for a poor lame dog like me!"

"I don't agree with you there. It was very sweet of you, Fred, to wish to give me a home; poor lonely me! I shall always reckon you to be a particularly dear friend. You befriended me by asking me to stay here; and now you are befriending my husband. You are too good to me."

She gave him a grateful glance, which somehow he found very consoling.

"I can depend on Gay not to say anything of the—er—step we contemplated taking."

"I am sure you can," she replied warmly. "It will never pass her lips. It will remain a sacred memory between you and me. And, Fred! don't throw yourself away on just anybody," advised Helen, in a new motherly tone that fell pleasantly on his ear.

"Not likely that I shall have the chance of throwing myself away on any one, as you call it?"

They continued their conversation, while Helen enjoyed her dinner in leisurely fashion. It was all about themselves; and, as the time passed, Fred lost his sense of disappointment and felt that, though he had been so suddenly bereft of his lady love, he had gained such a friend as had never come into his life before.

Without meaning to be hard-hearted or cruel, Helen had no real regret for the part she had played in Fred's life. If she had made his heart ache a little, he would get over it like the rest of them; and it would do him no harm. He was too good a fellow in every sense of the word to bear her a grudge because of all that had happened. To her it was a

delightful bit of romance, and he took it like an angel. He was certainly too good to be thrown away on a commonplace girl like Nellie Campbell. Perhaps later on she, herself, might find him a suitable wife and put Gay up to bringing about the match.

Perhaps Helen's brown eyes would have opened rather wide if she could have known that her simple-minded Fred was already devoting himself to the pleasant task of drying Nellie's tears and bringing comfort—in an avowedly friendly way—to her sorrowing heart.

As Fred left the room Geoffry flung himself on the sofa by Gay's side.

"Little chum! My best beloved!" he cried, drawing her to him with an irrepressible roughness of which he was not aware.

"Oh, Geoffry!" gasped Gay; and the unselfish, generous, and altogether lovable Gay gave herself to him without a word of remonstrance. She demanded no explanation and asked no reason why he had behaved so strangely, halting on the threshold of his new kingdom of love.

And Geoffry took the greatest boon that Heaven can give a man on this earth with a deep thankfulness. He actually trembled with the thought that he had in his crass stupidity so nearly thrown the priceless gift away.

But now that he had thrust open the door to happiness he handled the situation in a masterly and masterful manner.

"I thought I was never going to have an opportunity," he said at last. "What with the children and the invalid and the rest"—pause—"I was afraid that I should never have a chance"—busy pause—"of thanking you for your letters."

"Well, you have done so *now*! Dear old Geoff!"

"I have a lot more to say."

"You had better get on, then. Fred will be back presently."

"I am putting the cart before the horse! Beloved! we are not engaged yet."

"That was my foolishness," replied Gay, as she recalled her childishness in the forest. "I've grown older and wiser since then."

It took some time at the rate they were going to come to the point and adjust matters. The formal proposal had not yet been made nor accepted when they heard Fred's

step on the polished boards behind the curtain that screened the doorway. Geoffry withdrew the "lost arm" and rose to his feet as Helen and Goldenham entered. He stood in front of Gay with his hands folded palm to palm, in the oriental attitude of supplication.

"Will the gracious lady's honour take the hand and the heart of this worthless worm and consent to be his wife?"

"As his excellency pleases," replied Gay, with her smiling eyes full of laughter.

Geoffry turned round quickly to Fred, who was staring in astonishment while Helen responded with bubbling mirth.

"And will your honour give me this altogether too priceless gift?"

Fred's hand came out at once. "Good old chap!" was his reply, as he grasped Geoffry's fingers with a grip that confirmed his words, and left Geoffry in no doubt as to his consent.

It was three days later. Loveden was mending fast both in body and mind. Dr. Caversham had come up to Toona Kelli for the day. He reported that matters were going well. The fever had abated, and the nerves were soothed. The patient was losing that terrible fear which had haunted him day and night in the forest. He was able to sleep without waking in a confused panic. There was a sense of security in the closed bedroom which he had never felt in the Gipsy's hut, even though he had the protection of the watchful Dakshi and his formidable snakes.

The weakness following on the fever was great, and the Doctor recommended the seaside as soon as Loveden could bear the move, which Caversham hoped would be in ten days or a fortnight.

"A few weeks at the Galle Face Hotel will make another man of him, Mrs. Loveden," said the Doctor, as they rose from the lunch table.

"And after that?" asked Helen.

"You can't possibly leave the Island yet. You will have to wait till things are more settled," said Fred. "We must find Loveden some light billet where he can be kept occupied without anxiety."

"Why not assistant to Nellie Campbell?" said Gay.

"Capital!" replied Fred.

Thus they settled affairs by the aid of their limited human understandings, without taking into consideration the part Dame Fortune might play in the future. To more than one of those present there seemed a likelihood that a superintendent might be wanted on Campbell's estate instead of an assistant; and occupants for Nellie's comfortable bungalow.

A sound of pan-pipes in the garden attracted their attention. The party trooped out into the verandah, followed by the excited children.

The stone-swallower was seated on the path in front of the steps, and his older companion was established a little to the right. The "whole bag o' tricks" was spread out in readiness for a performance, with snake-baskets complete.

"Now then, children! what about some conjuring?" asked Gay.

The proposal was greeted with shouts of delight. She called Pedro to give him directions. Mats and cushions were brought out and the little people were seated on the steps.

"No stone-swallowing, Pedro; nothing that Master Billy can imitate to do himself harm," cautioned Gay.

A third figure hovered in the background. Gay recognized the old snake-charmer, who was not known to any of the others present. He was playing on his pipes and a cobra rested round his neck with one coil upon his arm above the elbow.

Dakshi caught Gay's eye and made a sign to her. She drew apart from the noisy party and went to the end of the verandah. Leaning over the balustrade she asked—

"What is it?"

"His honour? is the sickness leaving him?"

"It is passing; and the Doctor says that he will recover in ten days, when he will go down to the sea. He is with his wife, and we are all caring for him."

"The sea is good for fever. Take him soon, lady; before the rains come. Will this poor lump of mud be allowed to see him? There is something that must be told; and also something to give."

"Go round to that part of the house," she pointed to the side verandah into which her room opened. "I will meet you there."

Gay slipped away and knocked at her bedroom door. Caversham was with the patient, who was awake. Loveden

had heard the pipes, and was talking to the Doctor with some excitement. As soon as his eyes fell on Gay he said—

“The old man is here. I know it is Dakshi. Let me see him; he has something to tell me. Miss Goldenham, what message does he bring?”

She glanced at the Doctor for permission, and he nodded his head. She closed the inner door and went to the outer one which had been opened to let in the soft, sweet air of the sunny garden. The old man stood on the garden path.

“The master asks what news?” said Gay.

The Gipsy crept up to her, and at a sign approached the threshold. He stood at the entrance with the sunlight behind him, the primeval man of the forest face to face with the civilization of the twentieth century.

Dakshi peered at the invalid, whose head was raised; Caversham had propped him up with pillows.

“What news do you bring, oh! master of the Gipsies?” said Loveden.

“Honoured sir, your enemy is dead.” Then, dropping into his old tone of deep affection, he continued, “Have no more fear, my son! He lies dead in the jungle under a big tree.”

“Dead! Schmidt dead! Thank God! I am safe!” cried Loveden. “But are you sure?” he asked as doubt assailed him again.

The old man placed his hand on the wallet slung across his shoulder.

“What proof have you?” asked Gay, knowing how important it was that Loveden should be convinced.

“Here are all the properties of the dead master. I took them all. They belong to his honour lying there.” He glanced at Loveden. “Nothing is missing. Afterwards I called the police. Even now they go to the place where he lies to carry away the body.”

“Come in and show what you have,” said Gay.

The man of the woods stepped into the room with awe and reverence, such as he might have shown had he stepped into the inner shrine of the seven-headed cobra god. He squatted on the floor and laid out in rows the contents of the unfortunate John Smith’s pockets; his keys, watch, notebooks, money, letters, everything down to the veriest trifle.

Nothing was missing; nothing lost but the most highly prized treasure of all that John Smith possessed—his life. That had been taken, not by the Gipsies, but by the forest.

The Gipsies might perhaps, had they chosen, have snatched the treasure away from the forest; but to do so would have been to take upon themselves a greater responsibility than they dared to assume. To save such a man's life would have been to interfere with an act of the jungle deities. Would he have been delivered to the forest if he was not to die?

The part played by the Gipsies was to leave him to his fate; and after life was extinct to protect the body from wild beasts; and to deliver with the scrupulous honesty of these strange people the belongings of the dead man to the fugitive who had suffered so much at his hands. This was their idea of retributive justice.

"Good! good! my father!" said Loveden in a weak voice. "You may take your leave. I will see you again. Salaam!"

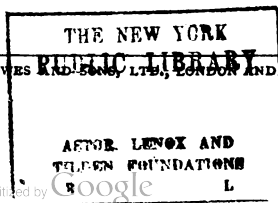
The old man prostrated himself, touching the floor at the foot of the bed with his forehead. His familiar, the cobra, its head in his hand, was made to do the same.

Twice the old man performed the Oriental obeisance; the second time it was for Gay. Then he rose and backed out of the room into the verandah and down the steps.

They heard the wail of his pipes as he passed through the garden and beyond the stables. From the green depth of the forest the sound came. It gradually mingled with the call of the barbet, the cooing of the pigeons, the scream of the eagle, the chirruping of the lizard, the whirring of the grasshopper, the tinkling of the mountain stream, the hum of the bees, and the rustle of the wind in the trees. It merged into the chorus of the forest, that marvellous alluring chorus which reaches only the ears that through love and long friendship with nature are open to it.

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